

# Packaging Pleasures

## Design, Play, and Consumer Change

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*Susan C. Stewart*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Loop was here earlier than I expected; so—even though I was really mad about the prices—all of a sudden I'm really excited to open the boxes... I feel like it's Christmas! It's just groceries!" (My Imperfect Zero Waste Life, 2019)

This chapter is about the pleasures of engagement with consumer packaging, especially the packaging of snack foods. It is also about the challenge of change. Change infers a shift in the patterns of expectation, action, sensation, and meaning that underpin a sensing collective. When material systems around which everyday collectives have coalesced are belatedly recognized as toxic, patterns of doing and sensing to which we have become attached are at the front line of change.

Currently most consumer packaging is single-use. Discarded, single-use plastic packaging contributes significantly to the volume of toxic waste that is impacting global bio-systems (Geyer et al., 2017; Simon & Schulte, 2017). The urgency of addressing the problem of plastic waste is recognized in multiple global initiatives to eliminate single-use plastics from our practices (EPA Network, 2017; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Kersten-Johnson et al., 2019). Despite significant technological advances in recycling and materials science, complex systemic challenges complicate any easy resolution of the problem (Moreau et al., 2017; Ofrias, 2017; Hird, 2017; Hahladakis & Iacovidou, 2018). Among these challenges one of the least discussed is the hold upon us of embodied habit and sensory reward. Our interactions with disposable packaging trigger deep-seated pleasures that inhere within the sensing collectives of our fast-paced consumer worlds.

Finding a way to interpret patterns of attachment and open them to change is key to addressing the toxicities in which we are entangled. In this chapter I draw

upon Roger Caillois's sociology of play (2001) to assist in interpreting our packaging engagements and the sensing collectives they inform. I suggest that the dynamics of play can be harnessed to shift practices. By grasping what is at play within a sensing collective, designers may be able to open pathways into new, less toxic patterns of pleasurable doing and feeling that can help to reconfigure worlds.

Packaging is political. Colorful, shiny, ephemeral plastic wrappers are key actors within the everyday, inconspicuous, and reassuringly routine dramas of unwrapping consumer goods. Gestures of unconcealment and appropriation performed in our daily engagements with packaged commodities, trigger cascades of pleasurable affect. To adopt Andreas Reckwitz's terminology, these colorful wrappers are "affect generators" within our practices of consumption (2017, p.116). They are a locus for endless embroidering of patterns of pleasurable interaction, through which fleeting but heady sensations of mastery flash and sparkle like the wrappers themselves.

Although inconspicuous in their everydayness, the pleasures delivered through packaging interactions have been recognized, captured, and, in some cases, playfully elaborated in unboxing videos. *Unboxing*, an amateur internet video genre, has grown rapidly in popularity since 2008, with YouTube video postings peaking in 2014–15. (Google Trends, 2021; Packaging News, 2018). The majority of unboxing videos adopt a 'product review' approach in which a presenter opens and reviews purchased, packaged products. Of more interest, given our focus, is a sub-genre oriented to the activity of unwrapping and revealing. Here, products are unveiled through protracted dramas of sensuous engagement as their packaging is progressively breached and removed.

To bring to life what is at play within consumer packaging interactions I draw upon two videos from this unboxing sub-genre. Both focus on snack food packaging. Snack foods exemplify the cultures of fleeting, intensely sensuous self-indulgence that are companion to disposability. The selected videos, published on YouTube by EsKannSammeln (2013) and Mairou (2014), have been chosen for the insights they deliver into specific pleasures rather than for their representative character. Both videos have proved popular, as testified by viewing numbers and approval ratings. In this chapter, these videos evidence the presence of Caillois's different types of play and their role in shaping the pleasures and addictions that inform our packaging interactions.

In the last part of this chapter, I turn to the Loop reusable packaging initiative launched in 2019 by TerraCycle (McTigue Pierce, 2019). Loop offers an alternative to disposable grocery packaging by providing a product-based service to manage the return and reuse of purpose-designed, branded, product packaging. The Loop system has been progressively introduced into the United States and Europe, with other countries to follow. An unboxing thread posted on YouTube by "My Imperfect Zero Waste Life" (2019) offers a product review of the Loop system, giving insight into its early consumer reception. Drawing on this and other videos associated with the

Loop launch I ask what we might learn by interpreting reactions to Loop through the lens of play.

## 2. PLAY AS A LENS FOR INTERPRETING PRACTICES

In his mid-twentieth-century text, *Man, Play and Games* Roger Caillois identified four types of play, referencing them through terms drawn from ancient Greece—mimesis, agon, alea, and ilinx (2001, pp. 12–26). As Caillois observed, these terms provide a starting point for identifying a realm of playful response and interaction within political and practical experience beyond his immediate focus on free play and games (2001, p. 67). Each term in Caillois's fourfold division of play has its own rich history. In what follows I draw on a range of thinkers to communicate the potential of each term to enliven our understanding of everyday practices and the sensing collectives that shape political and aesthetic experience.

For Caillois, mimesis is associated with role-play, imitation, and repetition. A larger literature on mimesis connects it to meaning-making and world-building more broadly (Taussig, 1993; Deleuze, 2014). The constitutive role of mimetic repetition in the formation of sensing collectives is well recognized in the sociology of imitation, contagion, and suggestion (Borch, 2019).

Agon—the Greek term for contest—Caillois associates with competitive play. But our sense of what must be contested reaches beyond play. As Socrates argued in *Plato's Republic*, the agonistic games of the gymnasium should prepare us for contests within the political arena. There, what is tested is our resolution—the metal of our soul—in seeking out and holding to what is right (Plato, 2017, 412 E; Gadamer, 1986a, pp. 95–100). This connection between sportsmanship and ethical behavior lives on, in English traditions of propriety, in condemnation of the unethical as ‘not cricket.’ Peter Sloterdijk, similarly drawing on this connection in Greek thought, elaborates the role of agon within the political. He attributes to it the cultivation of prideful self-restraint among powerful individuals. Self-restraint opens a respectful space within which others can speak and justice be done (2005, p. 950).

Together, mimesis and agon inform our generative impulses, our making and shaping of worlds and selves. Ongoing iteration, elaboration, and variation of patterns produces coherent worlds. Striving to realize the tangible goods enabled within these patterned worlds orients our energies and gives meaning and direction to our narratives. In these two types of play—mimesis and agon—the cultivation and exercise of human agencies is to the fore. Alea and ilinx, by contrast, point to our engagement with non-human agencies.

Alea denotes luck or fate. For Caillois, luck is the agency engaged in games of chance. In a larger sense, this is the realm addressed by Greek tragedy. The hubris of mortals is laid bare in our encounters with mischance and the fates. Efforts to limit

our vulnerability to chance inform both technological striving and our patterning of practice-worlds (Angier, 2010, p.4). We endeavor to craft territories within which predictability and human agency reign and the fates are held at bay.

Ilinx—the fourth of Caillois’s types of play—refers to the sensation of vertigo. Ilinx is the experience of precariousness and embodied risk at the limits of physical self-control. Caillois speaks of whirling games and of intoxication. Beyond play, ilinx is ever-present in both exhilarating and disorienting experiences within technology-driven worlds. At its most joyous, ilinx is allied to our experience of the sublime: in speeding, flying, soaring (Dant, 1998, p.83). At its most alienating, ilinx is associated with disorientation, detachment, dislocation, and isolation. Hence ilinx—like the other terms of Caillois’s typology—is patterned through experience well beyond his primary focus on free play and games.

Notably, the terms mimesis, agon, alea, and ilinx provide a vocabulary inclusive of both healthy and corrupt states (Caillois, 2001, pp. 43–55). Caillois’s mention of unhealthy forms of play is important to recognition of patterns of addiction, alienation, and power-play within our packaging engagements.

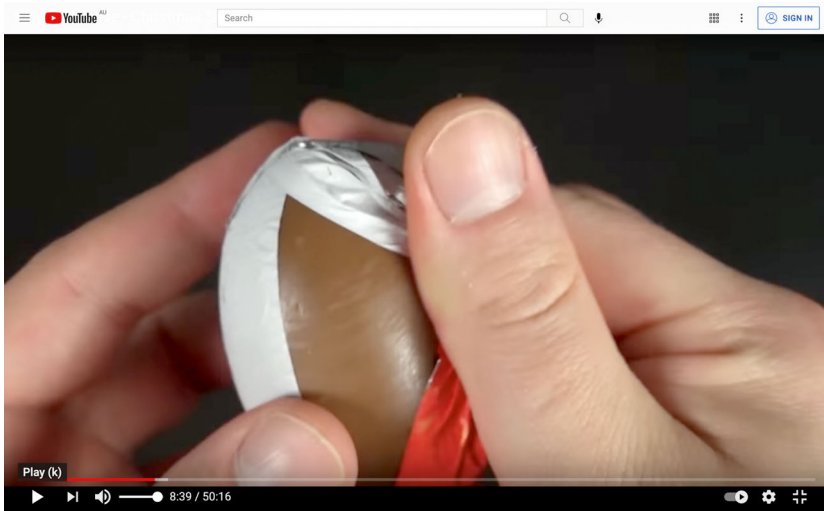
When different types of play are mixed—as is usual—they animate and ameliorate each other. The stabilities generated through mimetic repetition are rendered more delightful by an admixture of chance, alea. Alternatively, when the exhilarations of risky destabilization are sought through ilinx we might abandon ourselves to chance or contest the forces that threaten to overwhelm us. In these and other ways, mimesis, alea, ilinx, and agon can work together to variously comfort, delight, challenge or drive us.

Interpreting practices through the lens provided by these terms alerts us to the fertility of the tangible, sensuous experience-worlds that we are immersed in within our everyday doings. Together, mimesis, agon, alea, and ilinx enable recognition of affective registers shaped through creative iteration and striving, through encounters with limits, through shifts between empowerment and precarity. Further, they focus us upon ways our experience-worlds are shared, elaborated, contested, and transformed by their participants. And, when particular practices generate effects that entangle the toxic with the pleasurable, the deadening with the enabling, the inattentive with the social—as packaging practices do—thinking them through the lens of play may also help us to untangle ourselves to some extent, to pick-apart the life-affirming from the problematic and to loosen the hold that current patterns of engagement have upon us.

Unboxing videos are a form of play. They repeat other forms of play. And they repeat the themes, relations, and strategies of the world beyond play. In what follows I draw on unboxing videos to illuminate the playful underpinnings of our snack-food packaging interactions.

### 3. MIMESIS AND ALEA: UNBOXING KINDER SURPRISE

Figure 1: Unboxing Kinder Surprise; from YouTube uploaded by EsKannSammeln (2013, December 26; 8 mins 39 secs).



The first video segment I recount is from an unboxing of Kinder Surprise treats posted by EsKannSammeln (2013, 8:31–9:48). It has been viewed more than 11 million times to date. It delivers a play of mimetic repetition and muted alea through successive unveilings of chocolate eggs and their hidden, encapsulated toys. Notable in this drama of unveiling are the attention given to the minutiae of sensuous experience, the hypnotic effects of repetition, the pleasurable modulations between anticipated repeats and myriad small variations, and the satisfaction felt in the revelation of what is hidden as each layer is removed.

*On the screen: the focus is on a pair of hands. The camera is positioned as though the hands are those of the viewer. A foil-wrapped egg is held up to the gaze, supported gently by fingertips of both hands. There is silence.*

*The egg is rotated; quick movements interrupted to pause on each detail of the wrapping. Shaken, it rattles. Then, delicately grasped in both hands, the egg is positioned for opening. The right thumb drags at the foil which parts with sudden release. A smooth curve of chocolate is revealed. The naked surface is quickly rotated into the other hand. The dragging thumb gathers the foil and removes it with a smooth gesture. The wrapper is crushed and dropped.*

*Now the naked egg is cradled. Thumb and fingers of the left hand delicately grip it top and bottom; the right thumb applies pressure along the vertical seam. The egg is gently squeezed. Slight dragging pressure on the seam focuses the strain along its length. The shell cracks and partly caves in. Shards of chocolate collapse inward. The fractured egg is nestled in one hand while finger-tips gently push pieces of broken shell aside. A plastic capsule is revealed within. This capsule is the prize. It is delicately lifted from the shattered egg. The chocolate shell is set aside.*

*Fingers either side of its seam, the capsule is gently—then more firmly—squeezed and tugged. It splits. A small plastic toy nestled in a curl of paper is shaken out and the capsule set aside. The curl of paper is picked out and smoothed to reveal diminutive illustrations and text. It is closely examined then set aside. The toy is held up to the camera and rotated to allow leisurely viewing. Fully appreciated it is set aside. A new foil-wrapped egg is selected.*

The drama repeats—and again—with slight variation in the movements of the hands, in the tearing of the foil, in the parting of the shell, the opening of the capsule and the assembly of various tiny toys. The only sounds are slight noises made by fingers against foil, by the crushing of foil and breaking of chocolate, by the contents of the capsule clattering lightly onto the table and the occasional clicking together of plastic parts. Variations in the ritual from one egg to the next are myriad but slight and inconsequential. The effect is hypnotic. And there are many eggs.

The breaching of each egg is a choreography of sensuously charged repetitions, of small tugs at resistant surfaces, of rhythmic switches between caressing and insistent movements of finger-tips and thumbs. These repetitions seduce. Remembered touch, sensations of surface—smooth, fragile, resistant but giving way—these are evoked and the viewer drawn into vicarious participation in pleasure-laden interactions.

#### 4. UNBOXING, PACKAGING AND MIMETIC PLAY

Unboxing videos address the gaze. However, their potency depends upon their capacity to conjure remembered sensuous experience. These made-for-viewing enactments of the unwrapping and disclosing of consumer goods are crafted to intensify and repeat sensations that our bodies recognize. The drama of these videos is built on repetition—a repetition that echoes the less-choreographed repetitions of everyday experience. Each opening of a package repeats previous openings.

For the most part our interactions with packaging follow well-rehearsed cues indicated by configurations of form, changes of texture, subtle indentations that meet the fingers. We know where to grip, what to twist. We anticipate the feeling of release as a seal gives way, the slight pop as pressure is liberated. Our bodies have

incorporated tacit understandings of how to engage, what to expect, how to react. When an unboxing video repeats, slows, and dramatizes these experiences, the repetition does not belong to the video alone but to the embodied everyday experience that it invokes.

The role of mimetic repetition in our sensuous, embodied, being-within-practices and being-within-collectives has not always been recognized. Rather, within cultures of modernity individual ownership of one's own moves, emotions, experiences, and contributions has been grasped as paramount. However, in 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary thought there have been threads of attention to the potency of imitative repetition. One thread that has recently gained in prominence looks back to the work of Gabriel Tarde. Tarde's thinking took shape amid late 19<sup>th</sup> century controversies concerning the phenomenon of mesmeric suggestion and the challenge it posed to the concept of free will (Borch, 2019, pp. 13–17). For some among Tarde's contemporaries—including Bernheim, Delbeouf, and Le Bon—the question of manipulation through suggestion pertained not only to the hypnotism of an individual but also to the rippling of suggestion through a crowd. Tarde built on and moved beyond these thinkers. Key to this work was the linking of imitation and contagion.

Contagion within a crowd might seem a far cry from what is at play within everyday engagements with packaging. Undoubtedly there are moments of mutual engulfment in pleasurable affect when, for example, a bag of potato crisps is passed between friends. And, in a different way, this contagious sense of shared affect is also present for viewers of unboxing videos. However, while ripples or surges of shared feeling or response belong to specific engagements—*this* moment of plunging my hand into the glinting, rustling bag that you have passed me—, my interest here is not only in the role of imitation and repetition in shaping such moments. Equally important is the much broader role played by repetition in shaping the milieu within which such surges of shared affect might be triggered. It was in making this shift from the ephemeral to the constitutive that Tarde was so important. He saw beyond the immediate contagion of affect among participants in shared experience. His radical insight was to see society more broadly as “the organization of imitativeness” (Tarde, 1903, p.70). What Tarde grasped was the power of repeated, shared affect to shape, over time, a social milieu.

## 5. MIMETIC REPETITION AND MILIEU

One vivid image of the significance of shared milieu is provided by Peter Sloterdijk. He imagines a lost text by Aristotle in which a dyer's parable is narrated. Sloterdijk's Aristotle outlines a process for infusing the right pre-conditions—the right atmosphere or mood—into a *demos* prior to their engagement in politics. The parable tells of the immersion “of all citizens of the commonality in the same dyer's vat until they

are impregnated to the very innermost fiber of their being” (2005, p.947). This shared immersion in and permeation by a common dye, Sloterdijk emphasizes, does not eliminate differences:

Far from rendering the city monochromatic and reducing it to some one-dimensional consensus, it is these pre-political ‘undertones’ that enable those polychromatic layers to be added by dint of which each vibrant city can become a forum for debate. (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 947)

As Sloterdijk’s imagined source is Aristotle, the parable can be read as a re-presentation and extension of the argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—now oriented to the formation of a collective rather than focused on the individual soul. Following the argument of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, the dyeing process would not be accomplished through a single dip, swirl, and soak. Rather, there would be repeated immersion, a gradual infusion of the dye into the very fabric of the community as it washes through, penetrates, and suffuses every fiber on each successive plunge into the dyer’s vat. Over time, through successive immersion, the hold of the dye upon the fabric becomes ever faster. Each situational response that echoes a previous response gives added weight to a tendency to respond in that way, a tendency to repeat that action once again whenever next a situation calls for it (Aristotle NE, Bk2, Ch.1, 1103a-b).

Aristotle gave priority to the rational part of the soul. He sought to school appetitive and emotional responses to be under the direction of reason (NE Bk1, Ch.7, 1098a; Bk1, Ch.13, 1102b-1103a). However, for the most part, it is not reason that directs either embodied experience or the repetitions that play out within everyday engagements. Rather, responses are mapped into the body over time through engagement within an immersive environment that is suffused with ever-shifting variations on the already familiar. The shaping of a sensing and responsive body through repeated, embodied engagements is captured well by another thinker, Levi Bryant, who notes: “A body is not just something that we have, but also something that is formed as a result of the differences that it envelops” (2016, p. 302). To illustrate, Bryant points to those who, like his grandfather, have spent their life at sea:

My grandfather had implicated or enveloped the waves of the ocean through spending his days on the rocking surface of tug boats and barges and had explicated these differences in a new form of origami constitutive of his disposition to walk and stand in a particular way. He was an embodied wave, a fold of the ocean. (Bryant, 2016, p. 302).

Bryant’s grandfather shares, with others who have spent their life at sea, an incorporation of its movement into his body. More, they incorporate particular forms of attention, skilled engagement and care that mark out that life, as well as an aesthetic attunement to the vast, sweeping restlessness of ocean and sky. Those who



have spent their lives at sea share an embodied orientation to it that suffuses their entire being.

In these reflections on the shaping power of immersion within a milieu, mimetic repetition is recognized as playing a role. Belonging to a milieu comes about through ongoing immersion within its affective atmosphere. Belonging arises through engagement in a patterning play of repeated themes, gestures, and embodied responses. Hans-Georg Gadamer has likened this patterning play of repetitions to the play of sunlight and shadow beneath the dancing foliage of trees, or the play of light on the rippling surface of water stirred by a breeze (Gadamer, 1986b, pp. 22–23). This play is not dull repetition of the same but ever-shifting variation. It is infused with returns, repeats, re-positionings and re-imaginings. Myriad minor shifts and adjustments play like the endless rushing of a waterfall or the burbling of a brook over stones. It is this play of variation-within-the-same that informs the repetitions of interaction with packaging, repeated again and again in everyday life and again in unboxing videos.

## 6. MIMESIS AND AGON

*Figure 2: Unboxing Doritos; from YouTube video uploaded by Mairou (2014, October 23; 1 min 3 secs).*



The second video is a distinctive blend of unboxing drama and conquest narrative. *Doritos Unboxing (Euphoria Overload NSFW)* created by Mairou (2014) has been viewed more than 133,000 times. It is openly playful. But what is at play are tropes of agency, control, and subjugation. Mimetic role-play and agon combine.

The drama unfolds within a bushland setting:

*On screen: The camera is attached to and moving with a disciplined body. Purposeful movement through scrubby bushland, the camera focus is on a black-leather-gloved hand that grips a mobile phone in landscape mode. Colorful animations on the phone's screen appear to be informing the tracker's movement. Footsteps crunching unevenly on rocks and plant-debris are the only sound. This is a hunt.*

*The footsteps pause. The camera focus has shifted quickly from clasped phone to an eye-catching, shiny, parcel-like form set atop a low-lying, semi-distant rock. A focused, deliberate approach to the glinting object is commenced. As it comes more clearly into view the shiny form is disclosed as a packet of Dorito's corn chips, lying face down on the mossy, leaf-strewn surface of the rock.*

*The camera lens moves in on the shiny packet. A leather-gloved hand reaches to gently touch the gleaming surface then strokes it slowly. The surface is smooth and offers no resistance. The bright, silvery, reflective, metalized plastic packaging rustles and glints in response to the stroking touch. The gloved hand slides quickly and smoothly under and along the edge. The grip closes. With a snatch, flip, and flick, the package is lifted and tossed lightly onto its back, colorful side up, branding fully revealed.*

*A second approach of hands to the package. One hand carefully grips the package to steady it; the other strokes it again with a soothing, circling motion. The package is gently lifted and briefly transported—rustling, with reflections dancing across its responsive surface. Movements have been choreographed to maximize the crackling and glinting of the surface. The packet is placed with a quick double-movement and released with a flick; hands withdrawn quickly from view. It now lies, face up, on a clearer surface of the mossy rock ....*

Thus far, the action might qualify as a playful re-presentation of a Pokémon-Go hunt. The chip-package echoes the role played by shiny Pokémon—the most valuable kind—discovered, captured, and tamed. However, the focus on sensuous interaction with the rustling, metalized plastic surface of the packet intensifies the mood. This is about power. The drama highlights a contrast between masterful, purposive action and the passivity of the package as it shifts and gleams in response to stimuli and to repositioning. The action continues with mounting menace.

*With chip packet lying exposed, the hunter removes his hat—it is a plastic, child's-play, bowler hat. We see gloved hands, phone (tucked into one palm), hat, rock, and chip packet. The hat is placed carefully, bowl facing upward, onto the rock beside the chip packet. The phone is placed face down into the bowl of the hat. The play of hands on both hat and phone involves quick touches—a caressing of surfaces: touching, returning, touching again. The leather gloves are quickly removed and placed on top of the phone. Hands, now bared, push the hat away slightly then rub over one another in an enactment of hand-washing. The hand-washing is thorough; gestures attend to the backs as well as the palms and fingers of both hands, rubbing and cleansing. This is a drama of preparation.*

*Both hands move purposefully. The packet is seized and lifted. A brief pause, then it is swiftly rotated clockwise. Gripping fingers are brought together in the middle of its long side, positioned to tear the package. With fingers twisting and tugging an attempt to breach it is made; the tough plastic-foil compound holds. The package is rotated anti-clockwise and the attempt to breach repeated on the opposite side, again unsuccessfully. With increasing urgency, the package is rotated again and again; each edge tried without success. The package is thrust back onto the rock; hands rubbed quickly in frustration as they are withdrawn.*

The drama continues.

*A fluffy, pink, child's back-pack is produced and rummaged. Various tools are pulled out, a hammer and then a small saw, each examined quickly then cast aside. A final plunge of hands into the back-pack, and wire cutters are drawn from within. A cutting action is rehearsed. The chip packet is approached.*

Without detailing the remaining action, suffice it to say that with the help of the wire cutters the package is breached, ripped asunder, scattering chips which are grabbed and consumed with violent, mouth-stuffing, crunching haste and tumultuous waste. Then the hunter is running—fleeing the scene—and the action has ended (Mairou, 2014).

## 7. AGON AND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Mairou mobilizes technology in his contest with the Dorito's packaging. The wire-cutters—excessive for this task—draw attention to the role of technology in shifting power relations.

The tools employed by Mairou and the packaging he tackles are technologies deployed in our everyday world-shaping. Like all technologies, they extend our power, reconfiguring the terrain we inhabit to suit our purposes. Packaging, especially food packaging, is a technology of boundaries. The metalized plastic packaging of the

Doritos chips creates an effective boundary between the contents of the package and the forces of decay—the air and moisture—that would otherwise impact those contents (Marsh & Bugusu, 2007). As a technology of resistance and defense, the packaging is easily appropriated to Mairou's playful enactment of conquest.

The ancient Greeks understood technology—*technē*—as a way to reconfigure our chances in withstanding the non-human agencies that course through the world, intervening in human fate (Angier, 2010, p.4). *Agon*, our human striving to overcome the forces that assail or limit us, can be mediated by technologies that shift the balance of power. In games, the greatest fun is had when the powers of contestants are evenly matched. However, in our pursuit of everyday, practical concerns, our aim is often to diminish, as far as possible, any external power that might impinge upon us. Here, technologies are deployed not to balance the contest, as in healthy agonistic play, but to weight the contest in our favor.

Martin Heidegger points to habitual deployment of technological power for the purpose of domination as a dangerous disposition that infects our age (Heidegger, 1977). Ironically, far from delivering control, unrestrained deployment of technological power since industrialization has delivered toxicities, including from packaging waste, that are unbalancing the systems that have hitherto sustained us. Non-human agencies, fueled by our inattention to externalities of industrial production, now threaten our worlds.

Mairou's role-play enacts and celebrates the imbalance of power we have established between active, technology-assisted human agents and the rendered-passive, though resistant, bodies that we seek to subjugate and plunder. Caillois speaks of healthy and corrupt forms of play (1961, 2001, pp. 43–55). The exercise of power for the sake of domination is a corrupt, though intoxicating, form of *agon*. Concern to redirect this disposition to dominate is behind Sloterdijk's call for a different conception of *agon* within the political. Sloterdijk, drawing on the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, recognizes that the most important of contests is that waged in the exercise of self-restraint; when the powerful rein themselves in and allow other powers a place and a voice (2005).

Mairou's unboxing of Doritos confronts us with the sensory euphoria that courses through everyday enactments of technology-enabled dominance. The political challenge, in addressing the toxicities of our times, is to redirect such euphoria to the powerful exercise of self-restraint. And yet, the cultural supports for such restraint are difficult to detect within the sensory register of consumer capitalism, as currently structured.

If we turn to the sensory landscape of consumer capitalism more broadly, not only do we find that unhealthy forms of *agon* abound. Equally, Caillois's fourth type of play, *ilinx*, assumes an unhealthy form.

## 8. ILINX

Ilinx is present to contemporary experience not only in play but also in our everyday addiction to powerful vehicles and swift movement. The connection between the experience of the motorist and the aesthetics of consumer capitalism has been well captured in Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's influential text, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). There they note that the built landscape of Las Vegas is designed to be experienced from a moving vehicle. Large-scale, simplified forms—signs and decorated sheds—loom into view at intervals within a leveled and utilitarian landscape. The highlights of this landscape, the glittering neon signs dotted along the Strip, present moments of focused intensity and semiotic reduction to the passing motorist. They are seductive, memorable lures, designed for streamlined consumption. Flows of traffic, flows of pleasure-seekers, flows of packaged product, flows of money; the incessant movement of the Las Vegas Strip is an emblem of the capitalist economy.

Adam Smith conceived of growth and accumulation within a capitalist economy as dependent upon the swiftness with which money circulates (Swyngedouw, 2006, p.111). Loss of momentum, he argued, is destabilizing, potentially fatal. Equally, momentum and speed offset instability within ilinx-based play. At speed, through the directedness of their plunge, the hurtling skier or surfer moves responsively and with fine control, directing their thrust, their muscle-power, through the force of their momentum. The world shrinks to a tiny, speeding bubble of focused human agency, aligned with sublime forces in the face of which we are insignificant—catching a ride, giving ourselves over, embracing the precarity. The experience is intensely individual; each actor a focused blur of embodied skillfulness in a tightly defined exercise of responsive self-control. It is exhilarating and terrifying. Ilinx-based play is a saturated version of our experience within the capitalist economy. Like the skier, participants in complex, globalized systems of production and consumption narrow their attention, blurring the wider field to a pre-interpreted, simplified landscape that can be backgrounded within the intensity of focused engagement. Unlike the skier, however, the consumer closes themselves to precarity and risk. They are not exhilarated. Rather, they are desensitized and distanced as complexity and nuance recede from view.

Swiftness of flow, mobility, and speed have become defining experiences within the urbanscapes of capitalism. Speed disassociates the social and material assemblages, that flow through industrialized conduits, from any attachment to situated networks. Erik Swyngedouw ironically notes of such assemblages that speed, movement, and mobility render the field of vision more opaque, transient, and partial: “While the focus is on speed and high-tech networks, the material, socio-environmental connections and the uneven power relations that produce them, remain invisible” (2006, p.113). Through speed, time is banished. The consumer product that

circulates swiftly within this system is severed from its past and its future. Seemingly, it arrives from nowhere, is consumed—either in an extended moment of appreciation or in a rapacious gulp—and is lost to view (Griffiths, 1999).

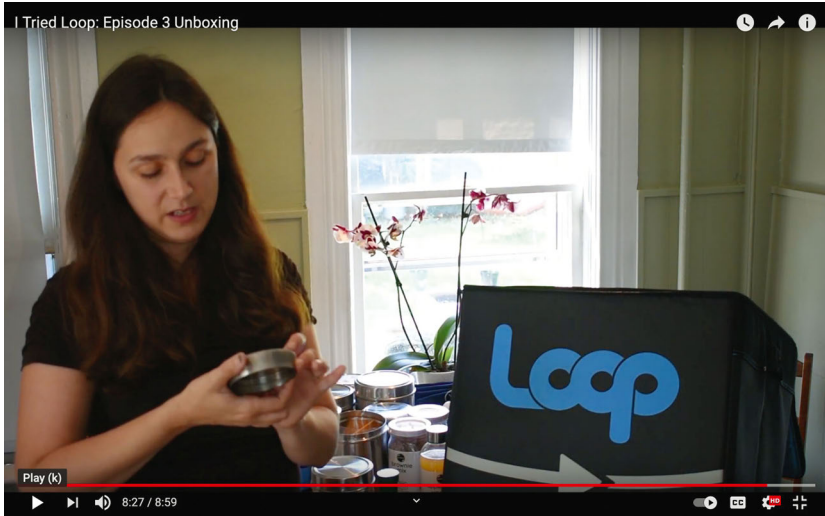
Packaging does much of the work in speeding products through consumption-oriented systems. At point of sale and point of consumption packaging triggers brief, intensely sensuous encounters before passing into waste streams. If mass-produced consumer goods gain little traction in our lives, their packaging has still less. It is this lack of traction that contributes most to the mood of consumer capitalism and to the problem of waste (Han, 2017). In the case of snack food products, rapid consumption is integral to the pleasure of the encounter. There can be no complexity admitted to this experience. A choreography of layers, perhaps, but simplified: smooth to the touch. An intensification of sensory feedback loaded into the moment of encounter and then, nothing. Just satiation.

Our everyday participation in consumer culture bears greater resemblance to the anaesthetizing boredom of a road trip than to the intensity and exhilaration of surfing or skiing. This is a watered-down version of ilinx. As for motorist along the Strip, the rhythms become dull. Even the highlights, though saturated, are repetitive and predictable.

It is not easy to shift expectations and configurations of meaning that are profoundly woven into the milieu within which we operate and which, like the waves ridden by Bryant's seafaring grandfather, have been absorbed into and have shaped our embodied being-in-the-world. So, how do we bring about change sufficient to make a difference to the problem of packaging waste? Appeals to reason and to virtue will not suffice. In the following section I examine a recent initiative by TerraCycle, the Loop reusable packaging system for groceries (2019).

## 9. LOOP

Figure 3: *Unboxing Loop*; from YouTube video uploaded by My Imperfect Zero Waste Life (2019, September 14; 8 mins 27 secs).



Loop, launched in 2019, is the most ambitious of recent reusable packaging initiatives in the grocery sector. Initiated by TerraCycle, a sustainability focused NGO based in North America whose previous focus has been on recycling, Loop is conceived as a large-scale, global, packaging reuse system. TerraCycle has enrolled, as partners, a number of multi-national grocery manufacturers and retailers. Significant investments have been made in the redesign of product packaging. The supply chain has been reconfigured from one-way flow to a loop between grocery manufacturer and consumer, incorporating the collection, cleansing, and refill of used, reusable packaging. TerraCycle's role is in the management of used packaging, ensuring that containers that can be reused are cleaned and returned to the manufacturer for refilling, while any packaging that cannot be reused is recycled. The goal is a no-waste packaging system (TerraCycle, 2019).

To gain sufficient following to make any real difference to our packaging practices, Loop must either slip smoothly into existing patterns and structures, or lure consumers into new and addictive patterns of action and sensory pleasure. In a promotional video by TerraCycle, their CEO, Tom Szaky, claims the Loop system will allow consumers to “experience a throwaway mentality, but be doing the right thing from an environmental point of view” (McTigue Pierce, 2019, 0:10–0:17). He makes



clear that their aim is to play into existing consumer expectations that packaging interactions will be pleasurable, effortless, and inexpensive. However, a closer view of Loop reveals that the sensory experiences expected to deliver pleasure, the systems to deliver convenience and the type of investment expected in order to minimize expense, are all significantly different from those that feed our current habits, additions, and assumptions. There is a gamble here. Can consumers be lured to commit to this radical translation of their ‘throwaway mentality’ into material practices that are not throwaway at all?

Early consumer reviews of the Loop experience highlight that the major challenge for the system to gain acceptance lies not in the sensory experiences immediately associated with handling packaged products, but rather in consumer expectations of convenience and affordability of the service as a whole (My Imperfect Zero Waste Life, 2019; Practically Zero Waste Podcast, 2021). Challenged on this, Szaky suggests that the actions required to return Loop containers are “about the same” as for disposable packaging. The containers, when empty, are ‘binned’ in the shipping container they arrived in. This shipping container, when full, is collected and returned to Loop. The sequence, he argues, involves similar effort to putting out garbage for waste collection. However, the real convenience of the system, Szaky suggests, is in re-ordering. Each product container can be set to trigger reordering when returned: “So it’s subscription, but perfectly timed based on your consumption.” (McTigue Pierce, 2019, 17:30–19:30). This proposed digital smoothing of the experience of re-ordering groceries plays directly into, and accelerates, the experience of *ilinx* as detachment (Han, 2017).

The tension, here, between systems designed to reduce consumer waste and those intended to smooth and accelerate flows of consumer goods, is clear. The buy-in from major players within grocery supply chains is likely motivated by not only the reputational advantages attached to participation in an initiative to reduce waste but also the potential for these new systems to further capture consumers within managed flows of goods.

If the convenience of the Loop system is problematically framed as an increase in smoothness of flow, the approach to affordability is equally bedeviled. The stumbling block is the established expectation that packaging should be low-cost and low-responsibility. The Loop system assumes the higher cost of reusable packaging can be distributed over multiple use-cycles. Initial cost to the producer is ameliorated if packaging is retained within the Loop and its life is not shortened by abuse. Thus, cost effectiveness for the producer is tied to consumer behavior. A degree of care is demanded. But this demand is at odds with consumer cultures, in which freedom from care is a key promise (Feenberg, 2017).

To stimulate care for packaging, Loop requires an up-front deposit to cover the value of each container should it not be returned in good order. The potential for financial penalty, and skepticism as to whether Loop delivers ‘value for money’, un-



dermine enjoyment of the system and its tangible product interactions (My Imperfect Zero Waste Life, 2019; Practically Zero Waste Podcast, 2021). The mood established is more transactional than collaborative.

This transactional mood infects unboxing reviews of the Loop system. Reviewers hold up the packaged products shipped by Loop, rotating them in front of the camera to provide a comprehensive view. Different components of the packaging—the container, label, and lid—are each engaged and tested with finger-tips and nails, tapped, rubbed, or picked at to determine the material type and potential for disassembly. The difference between glass and plastic is detected by tapping and listening, or gripping and pressing. This is a forensic examination, not an appreciative exploration of sensory potential. There is no extended savoring of surfaces, enjoyment of pressure release, delight in pattern, satisfaction with grip. Yet, the containers have undoubtedly been designed to be attractive and to give pleasure in use.

As prospective players within the small dramas of everyday consumption, the reusable jars, tins, and bottles of the Loop system embody the restraint and generosity that Sloterdijk suggests should be brought to political contests (2005). Simple lines and repeated forms bow to the constraints of the system, but without seeming dull. Curved surfaces invite grip. Lustrous finishes on stainless steel and glass offer discrete pleasures (TerraCycle, 2019). These objects are not mean. If non-humans are indeed political players, as Bruno Latour (2005) has helped us to see, then these containers set an example that might, in time, be repeated within their users' dispositions and sensibilities.

Despite the seductive potential of Loop's reusable containers, however, the reviewers seem not to have been seduced. Their mimetic role-play is that of the critic. Agonistic contestation here aims at holding to account. Any anticipation of pleasure upon receiving the first Loop delivery quickly runs aground amid uncertainty as to how the system works, reluctance to invest too much, and suspicion of corporate good faith.

## 10. LEARNING FROM UNBOXING

Unboxing videos reveal the pleasures attached to unveiling and interacting with consumer goods. Ritualized repetitions, patterned actions and responses, sensuous engagement with surfaces that give way to the touch; in unboxing, human agency is to the fore. We take possession, assert ownership and control of small worlds.

If mimetic repetitions and agonistic assertions of dominance are given rein in our intimate, sensuous engagements with packaging, alea and ilinx—chance and disorientation—are deliberately muted. In EsKannSammeln's unboxing of Kinder Surprise eggs, anticipation of the toy within drives removal of layers of foil and egg. But what is unveiled is not very surprising. A toy that provides more pleasurable in-

teractions than another is a lucky find. A toy identical to one already found is a disappointment. Chance modulates experience, but there is not much at risk. Similarly, *ilinx* is dulled. Disorientation within a world saturated by brand choice is managed through repetition and reduction.

Everyday interactions with disposable packaging provide micro-assurances of agency and of dominance within a pacified world. Given this, difficulty in recruiting allegiance to reuseable packaging is understandable. Gone is the euphoric sense of dominion and freedom from consequence celebrated by Mairou. In its place is a requirement to take care, and to deal respectfully with objects that are not consumed in the moment of engagement.

The challenge for Loop, or for any other system of re-usable packaging, is to build a patterned world of pleasurable interactions that affirm, through ongoing sensory feedback, the agency of those who use the system. Distributions of power within the system make a difference. The reviewers of Loop were concerned that they were at the mercy of mischance. They feared they were open to financial penalty if the containers should suffer damage. These messages, built into the system, alter the balance in favor of non-human agencies. The play of *alea* within the system puts participants at risk, and offers little reward.

An opportunity to reconfigure experience of Loop lies in recognition that the system is layered. Indeed, the system is a kind of packaged product. At its heart is a realm of intimate, sensuous, interactions with crafted reusable packaging. But this intimate offering is enclosed by an outward-facing set of interactions and transactions with corporate entities. Perhaps these layers each need a different mood? A different dynamic of play?

The outer layer might draw from Mairou's delight in contestation, reoriented to invert the usual hierarchy of power. Designers of the web-page, financial transactions, the delivery and return systems, might think about how to tilt these technologies toward user empowerment. Can the triumphant euphoria of Mairou be invoked within the Loop-user's interactions with the larger system? Can it be oriented to deliver users a sense of collaborative agency in driving corporations to greater accountability and more responsible behavior? If Sloterdijk's vision of democratic agon is relevant here, it is surely the power of corporations that must be reined in to give place and voice to users within the system.

Conversely, the inner, more intimate heart of what Loop offers might draw upon *EsKannSammeln's* nuanced unboxing of *Kinder Surprise*. In crafting a sensing collective disposed to savor Loop's slowing of consumption, designers might draw upon the sensuously charged repetitions of those hypnotic unveilings. Where these interactions would differ from those of the *Kinder Surprise* unboxing, would be in the robustness, the resilience of the reusable containers. They should communicate to the user a sense of generosity that endures. Materials that age well, that gain in luster

through use—and surfaces that continue to be delightful to the touch—these should play their role in cultivating allegiance between users and system.

Recognition of layers of interaction within a system, and the potential to play quite differently within each zone, might be key to negotiating the complex transition from consumer to collaborative culture that Loop attempts.

## 11. CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on our everyday interactions with consumer packaging, especially the glinting, light-weight, snack-food wrappers that are so closely associated with moments of indulgence and delight. I have highlighted the role played by these interactions in ongoingly acting-into-being the milieu of consumer capitalism. It is this milieu, in which we have long been immersed, that orients our bodies and senses within packaging engagements. Any initiative for change needs to work with the milieu into which it is introduced. Change can reconfigure, but only from within.

An original contribution to strategies for interpreting sensing collectives, is made by drawing on Caillois' four types of play—mimesis, agon, alea, and ilinx. Each of these terms has been interpreted more broadly than in Caillois's work on play, to unpack how patterns of sensory experience reproduce and give continuance to a milieu. Each type of play, I have suggested, produces a range of aesthetic and political effects. Together, they diversely empower and move us—reassure and stimulate. Different forms and combinations of mimesis, agon, alea, and ilinx, shape the moods, meanings, and aesthetic styles that circulate within a sensing collective.

Evidence of what is at work within our packaging interactions can be found in unboxing videos. I have drawn on videos by EsKannSammeln and Mairou that show our interactions with packaging to be infused with mimesis and agon, the types of play through which agency is exercised and extended. By contrast, their rendition of risk through alea and ilinx is subordinate, tamed. These videos capture and reproduce myriad, small performances through which we assert our dominance within a world of consumer goods.

At the heart of this chapter is a question about relations between sensing and the dynamics of change. The Loop reusable packaging system is an ambitious attempt to address the imperative to shift away from disposable packaging. Early unboxing reviews of Loop suggest a mixed reception of this system. Drawing on the playful insights provided by the unboxing videos of Mairou and EsKannSammeln, as well as on the types of play, I have suggested possible design strategies for better engaging users in this, and similar, reusable packaging systems.

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