

Wanted, a New Pleasure, Aldous Leonard Huxley

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Nineteenth-century science discovered the technique of discovery, and our age is, in consequence, the age of inventions. Yes, the age of inventions; we are never tired of proclaiming the fact. The age of inventions—and yet nobody has succeeded in inventing a new pleasure.

It was in the course of a recent visit to that region which the Travel Agency advertisements describe as the particular home of pleasure—the French Riviera—that this curious and rather distressing fact first dawned on me. From the Italian frontier to the mountains of the Esterel, forty miles of Mediterranean coast have been turned into one vast 'pleasure resort.' Or to be more accurate, they have been turned into one vast straggling suburb—the suburb of all Europe and the two Americas—punctuated here and there with urban nuclei, such as Mentone, Nice, Antibes, Cannes. The French have a genius for elegance; but they are also endowed with a genius for ugliness. There are no suburbs in the world so hideous as those which surround French cities. The great Mediterranean banlieue of the Riviera is no exception to the rule. The chaotic squalor of this long bourgeois slum is happily unique. The towns are greatly superior, of course, to their connecting suburbs. A certain pleasingly and absurdly old-fashioned, gimcrack grandiosity adorns Monte Carlo; Nice is large, bright, and lively; Cannes, gravely pompous and as though conscious of its expensive smartness. And all of them are equipped with the most elaborate and costly apparatus for providing their guests with pleasure.

It was while disporting myself, or rather while trying to disport myself, in the midst of this apparatus, that I came to my depressing conclusion about the absence of new pleasures. The thought, I remember, occurred to me one dismal winter evening as I emerged from the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs at Cannes into one of those howling winds, half Alpine, half marine, which on certain days transform the Croisette and the Promenade des Anglais into the most painfully realistic imitations of Wuthering Heights. I suddenly realized that, so far as pleasures were concerned, we are no better off than the Romans or the Egyptians. Galileo and Newton, Faraday and Clerk Maxwell have lived, so far as human pleasures are concerned, in vain. The great joint-stock companies which control the modern pleasure industries can offer us nothing in any essential way different from the diversions which consuls offered to the Roman plebs or Trimalchio's panders could prepare for the amusement of the bored and jaded rich in the age of Nero. And this is true in spite of the movies, the talkies, the gramophone, the radio, and all similar modern apparatus for the entertainment of humanity. These instruments, it is true, are all essentially modern; nothing like them has existed before. But because the machines are modern it does not follow that the entertainments which they reproduce and broadcast are also modern. They are not. All that these new machines do is to make accessible to a larger public the drama, pantomime, and music which have from time immemorial amused the leisures of humanity.

These mechanically reproduced entertainments are cheap and are therefore not encouraged in pleasure resorts, such as those on the Riviera, which exists for the sole purpose of making travellers part with the maximum amount of money in the minimum space of time. In these places drama, pantomime, and music are therefore provided in the original form, as they were provided to our ancestors, without the interposition of any mechanical go-between. The other pleasures of the resorts are no less traditional. Eating and drinking too much; looking at half or wholly naked ballerinas and acrobats in the hope of stimulating a jaded sexual appetite; dancing; playing games and watching games, preferably rather bloody and ferocious games; killing animals—these have always been the sports of the rich and, when they had the chance, of the poor also. No less traditional is that other strange amusement so characteristic of the Riviera—gambling. Gambling must be at least as old as money; much older, I should imagine—as old as human

nature itself, or at any rate as old as boredom, as old as the craving for artificial excitement and factitious emotions.

Officially, this closes the list of pleasures provided by the Riviera entertainment industries. But it must not be forgotten that, for those who pay for them, all these pleasures are situated, so to speak, in a certain emotional field—in the pleasure-pain complex of snobbery. The fact of being able to buy admission to 'exclusive' (that is generally to say, expensive) places of entertainment gives most people a considerable satisfaction. They like to think of the poor and vulgar herd outside, just as, according to Tertullian and many other Fathers of the Church, the Blessed enjoy looking down from the balconies of Heaven on to the writhings of the Damned in the pit below. They like to feel, with a certain swelling of pride, that they are sitting among the elect, or that they are themselves the elect, whose names figure in the social columns of the Continental Daily Mail, or the Paris edition of the New York Herald. True, snobbery is often the source of excruciating pain. But it is no less the source of exquisite pleasures. These pleasures, I repeat, are liberally provided in all the resorts and constitute a kind of background to all the other pleasures.

Now all these pleasure-resort pleasures, including those of snobbery, are immemorially antique—variations, at the best, on traditional themes. We live in the age of inventions; but the professional discoverers have been unable to think of any wholly new way of pleasurably stimulating our senses or evoking agreeable emotional reactions.

But this, I went on to reflect, as I shouldered my way through the opposing gale on the Croisette, this is not, after all, so surprising. Our physiological make-up has remained very much what it was ten thousand years ago. True, there have been considerable changes in our mode of consciousness; at no time, it is obvious, are all the potentialities of the human psyche simultaneously realized; history is, among many other things, the record of the successive actualization, neglect, and reactualization in another context of different sets of these almost indefinitely numerous potentialities. But in spite of these changes (which it is customary to call, incorrectly, psychic evolution), the simple instinctive feelings to which, as well as to the senses, the purveyors of pleasure make their appeal, have remained remarkably stable. The task of the pleasure merchants is to provide a sort of Highest Common Denominator of entertainment that shall satisfy large numbers of men and women, irrespective of their psychological idiosyncrasies.

Such an entertainment, it is obvious, must be very unspecialized. Its appeal must be to the simplest of shared human characteristics—to the physiological and psychological foundations of personality, not to personality itself. Now, the number of appeals that can be made to what I may call the Great Impersonalities common to all human beings is strictly limited—so strictly limited that, as it has turned out, our inventors have been unable hitherto to devise any new ones. (One doubtful example of a new pleasure exists; I shall speak of it later.) We are still content with the pleasures which charmed our ancestors in the Bronze Age. (Incidentally, there are good reasons for regarding our entertainments as intrinsically inferior to those of the Bronze Age. Modern pleasures are wholly secular and without the smallest cosmic significance; whereas the entertainments of the Bronze Age were mostly religious rites and were felt by those who participated in them to be pregnant with important meanings.)

So far as I can see, the only possible new pleasure would be one derived from the invention of a new drug—of a more efficient and less harmful substitute for alcohol and cocaine. If I were a millionaire, I should endow a band of research workers to look for the ideal intoxicant. If we could sniff or swallow something that would, for five or six hours each day, abolish our solitude as individuals, atone us with our fellows in a glowing exaltation of affection and make life in all its aspects seem not only worth living, but divinely beautiful and significant, and if this heavenly, world-transfiguring drug were of such a kind that we could wake up next morning with a clear head and an undamaged constitution—then, it seems to me, all our problems (and not merely the one

small problem of discovering a novel pleasure) would be wholly solved and earth would become paradise.

The nearest approach to such a new drug—and how immeasurably remote it is from the ideal intoxicant!—is the drug of speed. Speed, it seems to me, provides the one genuinely modern pleasure. True, men have always enjoyed speed; but their enjoyment has been limited, until very recent times, by the capacities of the horse, whose maximum velocity is not much more than thirty miles an hour. Now thirty miles an hour on a horse feels very much faster than sixty miles an hour in a train or a hundred in an aeroplane. The train is too large and steady, the aeroplane too remote from stationary surroundings, to give their passengers a very intense sensation of speed. The automobile is sufficiently small and sufficiently near the ground to be able to compete, as an intoxicating speed-purveyor, with the galloping horse.

The inebriating effects of speed are noticeable, on horseback, at about twenty miles an hour, in a car at about sixty. When the car has passed seventy-two, or thereabouts, one begins to feel an unprecedented sensation—a sensation which no man in the days of horses ever felt. It grows intenser with every increase of velocity. I myself have never travelled at much more than eighty miles an hour in a car; but those who have drunk a stronger brewage of this strange intoxicant tell me that new marvels await any one who has the opportunity of passing the hundred mark. At what point the pleasure turns into pain, I do not know. Long before the fantastic Daytona figures are reached, at any rate. Two hundred miles an hour must be absolute torture.

But in this, of course, speed is like all other pleasures; indulged in to excess, they become their opposites. Each particular pleasure has its corresponding particular pain, boredom, or disgust. The compensating drawback of too much speed-pleasure must be, I suppose, a horrible compound of intense physical discomfort and intense fear. No; if one must go in for excesses one would probably be better advised to be old-fashioned and stick to overeating.

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