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The Memetic Cigarette

Within about two centuries, the phenomenon of cigarettes became a global epidemic – a "pandemic" (Hughes 2003) that killed about a hundred million people in the twentieth century (Proctor 2011: 2). Regardless, it was estimated from data from 187 countries that in 2012, 967 million people – around 14% of the world population – continued to smoke *every day* (Roberts 2014). Cigarettes globally were being smoked at a rate of 6,000,000,000,000 (six trillion) cigarettes per year (Proctor 2011: 3). Such tremendous quantities of cigarettes brings the object to the level of a mass-produced, mass-consumed commodity like food or clothing. Except cigarettes are of course *not* necessary for life, but are *known* to be lethal or otherwise deeply damaging to quality of life of smokers. This quality, in addition to the cigarette's extremely wide range of user demographics, makes its ubiquity fascinating. How did society get to be (and how does it continue to be) this way? In answering this question, what roles do the object of the cigarette, the tobacco inside of it, the way that it is manufactured and advertised, and the climate of the cultures that consume it play?

Cigarettes are so deeply ingrained into modern human culture that this question is very hard to tease apart. Even the most personal experience one can have with a cigarette – alone, and to collect thoughts, for instance – could be seen to be manufactured through advertisement and through the individual's own process of becoming addicted (Hughes 2003: 166-171). Bluntly, this is unsurprisingly due to the past century's very deliberate marketing to inject an ideology into cigarettes, and embed it into society and imbue it with desire. Let us begin investigating this question of roles, then, by considering every actor involved. And, to discover to what responsibilities they may each lay claim, we must also consider the legitimacy and nuances of their agency. To this end, I invite the reader to consider more than just human agents as well. Nancy Tuana, in "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," introduces

> the conceptual metaphor of viscous porosity as a means to better understand the rich interactions between beings through which subjects are constituted out of relationality. … While an interactionist ontology eschews the type of unity and continuity celebrated in traditional Western metaphysics, viscous porosity helps us understand an interactionist attention to the process of becoming in which unity is

> dynamic and always interactive and agency is diffusely enacted in complex networks of relations. (Tuana 2008: 188-9)

Tuana utilizes her notion of "interactionalism" in arguing for the expansion of our notions of agency, taken beyond the human, in attempt to reduce anthropocentrism and consider the attentions of nature.

Countless scholars have examined the role of cigarettes in the terms of a specific group of people and in a specific time period, and the list of remaining relationships and contexts is still inexhaustible. Thus, rather than focus on a single context and understanding of the cigarette, and "see through human eyes" what the cigarette means to them, I will attempt to see through the macroscopic "eyes of the cigarette" as Tuana saw "through the eye of Katrina" (Tuana 2008: 190). Our approach, however, will have to be different, since the cigarette is indeed rather removed from nature. Rather, cigarettes are very carefully constructed, orchestrated, and marketed products being sold at the hands of multinational companies worth billions, which will of course play into our analysis. But granting agency to cigarettes and conceptualizing them as a natural force we shall see will open new avenues of discourse. What we shall find is a relationship between consumers, producers, and the product itself as an acting force, contributing to the human pandemic of smoking.

In his book *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan raises the important question of perspective in dealing with plant matter, pointing out that plants too have a form of autonomy:

> All … plants care about is what every being cares about on the most basic genetic level: making more copies of itself. Through trial and error these plant species have found that the best way to do that is to induce animals–bees or people, it hardly matters–to spread their genes. How? By playing on the animals' desires, conscious and otherwise. The flowers and spuds that manage to do this most effectively are the ones that get to be fruitful and multiply. (Pollan 2001: xv)

Undoubtedly tobacco has spent millennia evolving to contain its nicotine compound and thereby reach a position of cultivation, and later, mass-cultivation, by humans. If tobacco semi-autonomously engineered itself a mechanism to become used by humans for ceremonial practice, as it was first used by Native Americans, to then become re-appropriated and very widely grown, why not view the cigarette – the enduring "external" form of the tobacco plant as vehicle for its

success in a human-dominated environment – as a natural extension of that process? Examining cigarettes from this perspective – as agents with which human beings, both producers (i.e. the tobacco industry) and consumers, engage – may be valuable in illuminating the existence of the pandemic. This may help conceptualize the cigarette as a viable agent in this arena.

Later in the book, Pollan explains Richard Dawkin's theory of memes made famous in his book *The Selfish Gene*:

> A meme is simply a unit of memorable cultural information … Dawkin's theory is that memes are to cultural evolution what genes are to biological evolution. (Unlike genes, however, memes have no physical basis.) Memes are a culture's binding blocks, passed down from brain to brain in a Darwinian process that leads, by trial and error, to cultural innovation and progress. The memes that prove themselves best adapted to their 'environment'–that is, the ones that are most helpful for people to keep in their brains–are the ones most likely to survive and replicate … Culture at any given moment is the 'meme pool' in which we all swim–or rather, that swims through us. (Pollan 2001: 148)

Pollan goes on to apply this theory to plants such as cannabis: "[This] theory suggested a useful way to think about the effects of psychoactive plants on culture […] what if these plant toxins function as a kind of cultural mutagen, not unlike the effect of radiation on the genome?" (Pollan 2001: 149). It is not far-reaching to consider cigarettes and their role in society being one such meme, bringing us closer to the meaning of agency for the cigarette. As would a virus or any other adaptive organism, the meme rides the medium of a human commodity, exploiting human vulnerabilities such as mimesis and chemical addiction.

The modern study of memes has focused on their role spreading on the Internet, where they may be called 'viral,' in reference to their seeming virus-like, self-replicating ability. Robert Moore describes 'viral marketing' as a technique that "turn[s] every user into 'an involuntary salesperson'" (Moore 2003: 349). "In viral marketing," he continues, "the brand seems to underwrite (or sponsor) acts of communication, transforming users of the service—i.e. authors of email messages sent over the network—into de facto product endorsers" (Moore 2003: 349). To observe this behavior, we must look for the cigarette phenomenon in its most exaggerated, obvious form. Just as disease breaks out and spreads most rapidly in dense metropolitan areas, so

does smoking. In conjunction with human proclivity to copy, especially of an already very addictive behavior, an environment which increases visibility of masses of people on a day to day basis, in addition to the glorification of cigarettes in popular culture, is highly conducive to the meme of cigarette smoking to spread (Wetterer & Troschke 1986: 27). One instance may trigger several instances upon sighting, each of which then trigger their respective instances. As in viral marketing, besides first planting the seed via other means, cigarette companies do virtually no advertising, as the product is also the salesman.

In this way, not seeing it as a "virus" *per se*, but approaching it with similar medical gravity, Jason Hughes, author of *Learning How to Smoke,* calls it a "pandemic" in the very literal meaning of the word: "an addictive disease that spans the globe" (Hughes 2003: 143). In order for the disease to reach as many people as possible, it also exploits human trust through deception, misinformation, and concealment of information. In these cases, however, the burden manifests *on* the part of humans themselves, motivated to fester the infection with the promise of money. One example of simple deception is described in the prologue of Robert Proctor's tirade of a book, *Golden Holocaust*:

> I was sixteen … all the students were called into the auditorium to hear a guy from the tobacco industry tell us how bad it was for us to smoke … his message was clear: smoking is not for children. "An adult choice" is what sticks in my mind. Smoking was like driving or drinking or having sex–things we weren't even supposed to be thinking about. We were supposed to wait. (Proctor 2011: 1)

For a more formalized example, in 1954, an entity named the Tobacco Industry Research Committee was formed by leading tobacco companies to investigate the health accusations made against cigarettes. It ran a now-famous advertisement to counteract and deny these accusations entitled "A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers":

> RECENT REPORTS on experiments with mice have given wide publicity to a theory that cigarette smoking is in some way linked with lung cancer in human beings.
>
> At the same time, we feel it is in the public interest to call attention to the fact that eminent doctors and research scientists have publicly questioned the claimed significance of these experiments.
>
> Distinguished authorities point out:

> 1. That medical research of recent years indicates many possible causes of lung cancer.
>
> 2. That there is no agreement among the authorities regarding what the cause is.
>
> 3. That there is no proof that cigarette smoking is one of the causes.
>
> 4. That statistics purporting to link cigarette smoking with the disease could apply with equal force to any one of many other aspects of modern life. Indeed the validity of the statistics themselves is questioned by numerous scientists.
>
> […]
>
> For more than 300 years tobacco has given solace, relaxation, and enjoyment to mankind. At one time or another during those years critics have held it responsible for practically every disease of the human body. One by one these charges have been abandoned for lace of evidence. (Cited in Hughes 2003: 114)

By denying the validity of outsider science, cigarette companies were able to feign ignorance about the harmful effects of their products for a long time. With large amounts of money to lobby most governments and political organizations, cigarette companies stymied legislation and were able to suppress medical data and promote their own brands and associated lifestyles. A recent and notable example is a lawsuit filed by Philip Morris International against Uruguay for attempting to "increase … the size of health warnings to cover 80% of the front and back of cigarette packs" (Philip Morris International 2014). PMI claims that such measures "arbitrarily and unjustifiably restrict legitimate businesses like ours from using their brands and trademarks to sell their products," and that "building a brand is a long-term, significant investment." When comparing "A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers" to the strategy used by PMI, it becomes clear that maintaining power has shifted to a legal rather than medical or scientific debate, citing copyright and brand as main assets damaged by "truth" about cigarettes, as if cigarette companies still try to defend their misinformative advertising and perpetuate their ideology.

How is this still a sign of cigarette agency? Indeed, it may be unfair to assign this project of deception and concealment of information very clearly thought-out by cigarette companies and their advertising agencies to the cigarette pandemic itself. Likewise, it doesn't seem reasonable that the consumer is blamelessly at the whim of the cigarette companies. Peter Miller & Nikolas Rose are also critical of this view of "the consumer as a passive being, acted upon by

the vast advertising and cultural apparatus that invented desires, created false need and manipulated individuals into identifying with objects that would otherwise have been alien to them" (Miller & Rose 1997: 6). Rather, they claim that "advertisers and psychologists held a different and more complex view of the 'subject of consumption'" (Miller & Rose 1997: 6). Following a highly extensive study of the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, an institute that put excruciating detail into humanistic research for advertising agencies, they conclude that

> they did not treat consumers as passive automatons to be manipulated and equipped with false needs, nor did they treat the act of consumption as matter of the sovereign will of the producer to which the consumer must succumb. … In order for a relation to be formed between the individual and the product, a complex and hybrid assemblage had to be inaugurated, in which forces and flows imagined to issue from within the psyche of persons of particular ages, genders or social sectors were linked up to possibilities and promises that might be discerned within particular commodities, as they were organized within a little set of everyday routines and habits of life. (Miller & Rose 1997: 30-31)

Miller & Rose demonstrate, at least in one case in England, following World War II, that advertisers and commodity-manufacturers could indeed distinguish themselves from the new widespread practice of consumerism, or in our case, smoking. They don't analyze, however, whether or not the phenomenon of "false necessities" truly occurred – i.e. if surveys before and after marketing indicated that products simply entered consumers' minds as necessary for life – they just show that this was not an intended sales strategy.

Where shall we place the blame for the millions of deaths by cancer, then? Even if smokers aren't being entirely misled and ensnared by advertisers, highly pertinent health information is being concealed from them. And after smoking enough, the addictive potential of the nicotine in the cigarette itself surely can be said to bypass the individual's choice in the matter. And in this sense how much 'addictiveness' can be imbued in an object, versus being latent in its user?

This issue is inextricable from the very nature of the object – the cigarette is so sellable to human cultures that its existence seems *emergent*, as if it were truly a disease, and ergo

consumption is just as natural, having been designed (naturally and artificially) to be addicting and 'viral'. Both consumer and producer are merely fueling the fire that cigarettes seem to be burning on their own. Even so, it is still unclear where the blame should lie, but certainly there are political motives in the arguments behind each pointing finger. For tobacco companies, the responsibility lies plainly on their users and their "adult" decision to use their tobacco product, and therefore they remain blameless for any liabilities the cigarette may incur. For Proctor, blame lies fully on the tobacco companies, as he imagines their cessation of production would also cease the epidemic, but not without the same sentiment from the smokers – "smokers themselves don't like the fact that they smoke" (Proctor: 2011: 10). This mirrors what Miller and Rose seem to demonstrate, that much of the desire seems to be dormant within users, to whom tobacco companies simply supply with means of expression or satisfaction. For consumers, placing the blame is perhaps more complicated, as smoking seems to exemplify several social functions.

In her book *Lighting Up: The Rise of Social Smoking on College Campuses* (2015), Nichter explores a constellation of reasons why students on college campuses engage in smoking as an integral social relation with peers. The following summarizes what is later greatly evidenced in the book:

> "On the college campus, the term 'social smoker' most commonly refers to a person who smokes with friends at parties when consuming alcohol. … Other patterns of social smoking also exist. A person on break from work may smoke because his or her coworkers do, or a person who rarely smokes amy have a cigarette with a troubled friend who is smoking as a way of bonding" (Nichter 2015: 1).

Even at a noncommittal, nonaddictive stage of smoking tobacco, the act of smoking can have great value to the user in developing social bonds via engagement in the societal structures already in place, arguably constructed by cigarette advertisers. Tobacco can fit itself well into ordinary life, being a 'transparent' drug – one that "merely inflects the prose of everyday life without rewriting it" (Pollan 2001: 142). Hughes found in many interviewees that tobacco use functions as an emotional dependent, as a tool for self-control (i.e. for self-calming, introspection, de-stressing), and sometimes as purely an addiction that has been accepted as part of an individual's life (Hughes 2003: 177-189). These are all, of course, hugely beneficial tobacco use strategies for tobacco companies, as it maintains a consistent purchase of cigarettes.

What we find is a commodity that is used widely all over the world due to its undeniable, largely constructed presence in social norms and customs. I have shown that it is hard to identify its reasons for success or singularly place the blame of its harms for this reason. Viral and memetic, the phenomenon of cigarettes exploded after it emerged during colonial contact in the Americas. Producers found ways to brand and sell an otherwise "inherently meaningless product" (Williamson 1978: 33); consumers became hooked and formed cultures around it. The cultural meanings, symbols, and communications via cigarettes is now deeply rich, the object having been used to express a diverse range of identities, between the rich, the poor, the working class, the rebellious, the soldier, the intellectual, the tough, the sensitive, the elegant, and so on. The macro-concept of cigarettes, then, seems to have produced an agency of its own, not entirely owned by companies nor consumers. I believe if our society wishes to rectify the harms done (and to be done) by cigarettes, it should be identified, as Jason Hughes correctly observed, as a pandemic in entirety.

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