Introduction to the Interior

The purpose of the subsequent discussion is to look for connections between things and images, and finally, to answer the question of why have the selfies of people with virtual bunny ears become so popular.[1]

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It was the 17th century, the Dutch Golden Age. After their successful rebellion against the Spanish dominion, the Netherlands had established itself as a new global mercantile superpower. Their flourishing entrepreneurship and a steam of new money created an unprecedented wave of social mobility. A rise in social status is accompanied by moving from less prestigious living environments to more prestigious ones. As there were not enough impoverished manors available to be bought up by the newly enriched bourgeoisie, a new type of living environment was invented: a new private house.
It is not an exaggeration to say that it was a revolutionary invention which changed the history.

What was so revolutionary about the new private houses? Traditionally, a person had been one with his habitat: intact, from the cradle to the grave. The birthplace and inheritance determined one's life and survival while the "landlord's" actual reach over the household was relatively small. Major changes in the living environment, let alone the change of habitat, were almost always associated with catastrophes and tended to be devastating. Accordingly, one's material world had been predetermined - home, household items, tools, furniture, status symbols, all were obtained as an inheritance, and were, when the time came, passed on, in a well-maintained condition, to the next generation.

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[1] *"Beyond the Selfie: With the new Face Filters, Snapchat Dives into Augmented Reality", Wall Street Journal, 4/18/2017*

The defining difference between the heritage property and the new estate is that the new estate is *empty*.

Whoever has, at some point in their lives, dealt with acquisition of real estate, is well familiar with this anxious feeling, a *horror vacui* created by the new, inhabited home. One thing the 17th-century Dutch bourgeoisie definitely did not lack, was courage. They quickly recovered from the first shock and discovered that this existential emptiness can effectively be filled with furniture. One just needs things, a lot of new things. And so it began. The demand created the supply,[2] the expanding market of consumer goods pushed the production which resulted in industrial revolution which lowered the prices, allowing even more members of the society to increase their consumption, which expanded the consumer goods market, stimulated the production, etc. Having been born in the Netherlands, the consumption culture then spread to England, France and beyond.[3]

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One could summarize now that the capital created emptiness which then gave birth to consumerism - but then it would sound utterly negativist which would be unfair against the people and unfair against the things. In fact, consumerism became the tool of modern emancipation. *Populuxe*[4] effectively blurred class distinctions, while being both imitating and individualizing.

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[2]   The traditional Marxist economic history focuses on production relations, largely bypassing consumption as a by-product of production. A more contemporary socio-historic approach places a much more important role to the consumer culture. See, for example, De Vries, Jan: *The Unemployed Revolution: Consumer Behavior and Home Economics, 1650s*, Cambridge. 2008

[3]   Obviously, the debate around defining the birth of consumer culture remains open. See for example: Ryckbosch, Wouter: *Early Modern Consumption History: Current Challenges and Future Perspectives*, BMGN, 2015.

[4]   The term was first introduced to mark the space-futurism inspired consumer goods in the United States during the 1950s-60s. In general, *populuxe* is a cheap product that imitates luxury. In the context of the current text, see. for example: Fairchilds, Sissie: *The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in the Eighteenth-Century Paris, Routlege*, 1994.

Once they had learned how to furnish their homes, they soon also learned to *design* it. The home then becomes the *interior* - a carefully orchestrated display of the private world. The primary task of the interior is to expose in order to conceal. The latter is particularly well illustrated by the fact that one of the first mass trends in home decoration, a trend which in the 18th century spread even to the poorest households, were – the curtains. Simple and affordable, yet highly effective visual filters to control the *image* about private life one shares with the public.

Thus, the most fundamental changes in everyday life that came with the emerging consumption culture, were that the living environment was divided into two: the public and the private sphere. The border between these two was the interior, built from consumer goods.

The social debate of the 18th and 19th centuries was characterized by the obsessive search for the "right balance" between the public and the private spheres.[5] The guarantor of the balance was a well-guarded border, a highly regulated and fetishized material culture. On one hand, the Victorian era declared its sacred integrity of the home and private life; on the other hand, the strict and complex moral code characteristic of Victorian times expanded even to the furniture and other household items (for example, exposed table legs were considered immensely amoral). The tension between the private and the public sphere was so great that the border between those, the interior, was in some more modest households, pressed as thin as a facade, a curtain, a family image. It's no wonder that the truism about the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie derives from the very period.

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[5]   Jürgen Habermas, for example, has called the Victorian era "the golden age of the balance between the private and the public".
     See also: Kumar, Krishan; Makarova, Ekaterina: "The Portable Home: The Domestication of Public Space", Washington, 2008.

A delicate balance persisted, a fine curtain faded until, at the beginning of the 20th century the *Staatliches* Bauhaus[6] tore it down – only to spread it over the whole world as a cerecloth. At least according to Jean Baudrillard.

In the *Le Système des objets* (1968) and *The critique of the economic critique of the political economy of the signe* (1972), Baudrillard argues that Bauhaus's doctrine of universal functional aesthetics, which "made it possible to design everything from a spoon to a whole city", was actually the second Industrial Revolution, the semiurgical revolution. The one that completed what was started by the first, 18th-century metallurgical industrial revolution: it transformed the whole world into an interior. The Bauhaus's functional aesthetics meant nothing more than the conversion of the use value of all objects into aesthetic *style*. The celebrated functionality of the modern environment was merely an excuse to conceal the all-consuming political hegemony of the style (in the same discussion, Baudrillard argued further, saying that the reality is dead, nature is an illusion and the objects have been replaced by signs - but this is not important here).

Through a disciplined design, in the 20th century, object culture transformed into visual culture. Since the recent past is more or less familiar to all of us, there is no point to extensively describe here, how industrially produced and stylistically crafted visuals began to dominate the modern living environment, and how image/imago has become the main merchandise of the market economy. Suffice is to say that, despite the centuries past, despite political, technological, and semiurgical revolutions, image economics has remained true to its early-modern-day roots. Visual culture continues to focus on interior furnishings, meaning, it exposes in order to conceal: the more stylish is the image, the more certain one can be, that it is a carefully planned display. As virtually the whole environment has been transformed into an interior, the process is being accelerated. While the *haute couture* aesthetics of style icons are traditionally extremely complex and costly, affordable only to a few, the demand for attractive visuals has pushed the image industry which at the end of the last century resulted in a digital image revolution, greatly reducing the cost of image

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6   Bauhaus is the German school, active in 1919-1933, which greatly influenced modernist culture, especially design and architecture.

production. The simple image editing software has brought image-making to the masses, enabling us now to talk about the visual emancipation, as the economics of imitation and individualization, concealment and exposure has become available to everyone.

If nothing else, at least you can afford the virtual bunny ears.