



**SENSING**



# THE CREAM EFFECT

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“Would you like that with whipped cream?” the waitress asks the customer. Perhaps he is already feeling mildly guilty for having ordered a hot chocolate. Then, perhaps, a “what the heck” feeling overcomes him and he says “yes, I do!” Or maybe he has entered the café fully intending to go for the full hit, satisfying the craving for a dose of gustatory and nutritionally utterly unnecessary, fat-enriched pleasure. In a time where supermarket shelves offer vast arrays of products in many grades of fat-deprivation and where countless subdisciplines of medicine have banded together with good old-fashioned social control to keep us looking for low fat and lean, it takes courage to order whipped cream.

The cream effect names, not entirely arbitrarily, a patterned process involving sensory experience and subsequent longing for more. The term stands here for the collectivity of manipulable sensory pleasures which, as a rising anthropology of the senses will argue, require differentiation – both in terms of the human senses (be they five or more) and different cultural settings and historical eras (Corbin 1991; Howes 2003). Hence, another researcher might speak of the Chanel N° 5 effect, or the harp, sunset or velvet effect. I chose taste and gustation to stand for the whole and leave it to another to empirically and ideologically challenge the choice of term. There is no argument entailed here, however, that gustation is hierarchically above the other senses in the cream effect (and I acknowledge that for some the choice of this substance for a label might be all but pleasing or even allergenic; I apologize and hope they will

humor me...). Two salient features of the cream effect that are to be explored further below are 1) its almost anti-Cartesian logic (I sense, therefore I am pleased) and 2) its availability both for an individual’s self-gratification and for manipulative use in human interaction.

Many cultural practices feature creaming as a literal and metaphoric component: it is the additional touch, the extra that creates or enhances pleasure and thus is particularly suited to pamper, mollify or, as we will see, influence another. Those who have been lucky enough to experience the cream effect and the excess of nice, bodily experience it offers, will fantasize about it during times of the opposite experience of deprivation: a body and mind exposed to harshness, pain, and scarcity may long for that sensory high that spreads warmth through the body. Embodied pleasure provides such a sense of affirmation of the union of body and mind in human existence, that by contrast its absence – a state of sensory deprivation and lack – fosters desperation and doubt.

Popular literature provides all kinds of appropriate references for the cream effect’s powers. While subtler than a land of victual plenty such as *Cockaigne* or the German *Schlaraffenland*, the joys of creaming appear as sources of solace and pleasure in diverse settings. To offer just two: In the prose of the nineteenth century Swiss serial novelist Jeremias Gotthelf, depictions of harvest feasts conjure up images of mouth-watering richness rewarding day laborers for weeks of backbreaking work (e.g. 1846).

And what does Goldy, mystery author Diane Mott Davidson's present-day catering sleuth do when she has suffered scratches, bruises or worse in her pursuit of murderers? She reaches into her pantry and bakes mouth-watering and especially rich sweets or, better yet, lets her policeman husband pamper her with Tex-Mex creations slathered in sour cream, followed by further pleasures in the marital bed (e.g. Davidson 2000). Creaming is an optional addition, a value added, an improvement on the level of "embodied mind".

The cream effect produces first and foremost a sensory experience, lodged between physiological and cognitive, individual and cultural awareness. Taste and touch, smell, sight and hearing are nothing if not eager for "cream" – for while the senses naturally provide us with many crucial signals for our bodily survival, they are also the primary conduit for experiences of pleasure. Creaming works internally or externally, and it comes in literal and figurative forms. Potions and lotions that heal and pamper skin make us touch and rub, please and relieve the biggest organ of our own or someone else's body with gentle hand motions. There is a bridge between the sensory stimulus, the luxurious feeling it releases, and the memories and longings it opens. Hence the effect of creaming is supremely individualistic and perhaps egoistic revelry.

As the smooth richness spreads slowly and pleasurablely through the body, the mind seems to slow down, helping the body capture all the goodness that can be had from a dollop of cream. Yet given this effect, and given human communicative rules and ruses, the cream effect is also available for manipulation: I am not the only one who can order hot chocolate with whipped cream. Someone else can decide to offer it to me, literally and metaphorically, lovingly enjoying the sight of my pleasure or cunningly preparing me for some kind of action or opinion that I might, uncreamed, fail to warm up to. Unlike the proverbial "buttering up" – clearly a derivative or rather a too intensely stirred cream effect... – creaming undertaken by another is subtle: a hint of warmth in a gaze usually neutral, a honeyed hue in the voice, a chair pulled imperceptibly but

comfortably closer. All these techniques potentially raise, somatically or just seemingly, the body temperature, thawing a chill and forestalling the resistance that a proposition might otherwise provoke.

Creaming offers a slightly guilty, but oh so pleasurable luxuriation. Its bodily experience is different though perhaps related to what is in German called "getting soaped" or "soaping someone" (*einseifen*) that is, feeling well and pleased under the influence of someone who seeks to make literal or metaphorical profit from us or, to use an English expression, "pulling the wool over one's eyes". Proverbial expressions for creaming in different languages could be an empirically interesting and trying avenue to clarify just which sensory-cognitive-rational mix-up is being plotted and executed.

It is easiest, naturally, to document the cream effect within the realm of foodways. A carrot soup transforms from a wholesome food into a delectable one with the addition of cream or a dollop of sour cream (or, for the really fat conscious, a spoonful of plain yoghurt...). There are gustatory pleasures where richness of flavor can spread from palate to stomach to body, signaling comfort and satisfaction, a bodily warmth. Creaming thus pushes the palatable into the realm of the pleasurable. The greatest challenge posed by modern forms of asceticism such as dieting is to find substitutes for the cream effect's particular sensory-bodily stimulus. Generally this is done by shifting the aesthetic emphasis; the sense's collaboration in creating pleasure has long been recognized in aesthetic philosophy (Burke 1958; Baumgarten 1983). A modern spa, perhaps even located in a former monastery, will serve its meager meals on exceptional porcelain, often on plates whose absurd size vis-à-vis the tiny portion reinforces the "I am doing something good for myself" feel. Scented air, thick, soft towels and robes will pamper the skin, musical selections add to this sense of well-being and together (although clumsily), the pleasures served to eyes, ears, nose and skin make up for the lacking cream. Whether cognition can be willed to translate such sensory substitutes into positive experiences depends entirely on how strongly an individual subscribes to the ideological precepts sur-

rounding the cream effect in a given cultural context.

Naturally the pleasures of creaming are culturally shaped and passed on: the pleasure of biting down on a fatty looking grub is likely to be inaccessible to someone who was not enculturated in the Brazilian rain forest, as Lévi-Strauss observed. The smell and taste of delectable, desirable cheeses are abominable and utterly unsuited to evoke the cream effect for many non-Europeans. A lulling tune and voice in one place may be disharmonious and disturbing in another, though the creaming of sound is probably more recognizable cross-culturally than that of gustation.

The cream effect may reside between body and mind, between individual and culture – but culture works hard at prying it out of this liminal state by offering guidelines and restrictions on the appropriateness of “creaming”. These are most evident in efforts to portion, restrict and ideologically discipline what our sensorium would gladly endure in great amounts. Religious critiques and disciplines of pleasure on the one hand, and the eager absorption of medical knowledge into everyday practice on the other, have left us with a number of confusions regarding the simple pleasures of creaming, inserting a cerebral monitor between sensorium, bodily experience and feeling.

Real cream clogs some people’s arteries, and it favors our fat deposits rather than our muscles, and hence the global diet of the health conscious excludes the rich substances whose fatty smoothness are also happy-making. We learn new discourse and eating practices that attempt to teach us to cerebrally substitute the experience of creamy pleasure with the virtuous knowledge of oat bran and celery. The number of creamy lotions for application externally to ever more muscular and yoga-steeled bodies has, however, grown exponentially. Yet external creaming is no longer a simple pleasure between one, two or more – its value has risen, studios and parlors that cream and massage us for a fee have sprouted even beyond metropolitan areas. The luxury of creamy touch has accrued more status and like the gustatory deprivation of cream, it is cerebrally enhanced through the scientific and multiculturally-branded

knowledge that we are “doing something good” by paying for (perhaps not so nice smelling) creams and creaming services (Lau 2000).

The cream effects of taste and touch requires management and considerable capital investment which raise their price. But there remains, it would seem, a human capacity to locate “cream” in places where cultural ordering and market forces have not yet reached. There are perfumes and room deodorizing substances that guide our scent-repertoire in culturally approved and economically priced directions. But the child returning from school and catching a whiff of a cake that has just left the oven will experience a brief and unexpected high, having their happy home reentry further “creamed” by a pleasing sensory experience (I am aware, of course, that “the smell of baked goods” is probably available in a spray can). A parent discovering the smell of a newborn, a couple in love recognizing the scent of the other’s sweat – these are pleasures so idiosyncratic in their nature, and in the way we appreciate them, that the positive experience is hopefully shielded from cultural control and capitalist profit.

Sight has long undergone severe schooling, regarding what we are supposed to process as aesthetically pleasing, but beneath the surface there must still be a capacity to experience the visually beautiful or surprising with the capacity Goethe called “the enlarging of the soul”. This experience gives us an unexpectedly pleasurable, and sometimes nearly painful, jolt to body and mind.

Sound, finally, is perhaps our greatest alternate realm for the culturally mediated cream effect. Sound designers have long figured out how to make car doors and blow dryers emit sounds they think we like (and then make us pay for their efforts). But we still know how to find and gorge on music that satisfies a particular bodily and emotional craving, employing new technological gadgets to bring the cream ever closer to our nervous system. There is of course a ready cultural critique of headphone-carrying joggers and youths ruining their hearing by blasting music much too loudly. But this is aimed at the lack of care for the sense of hearing, not at the basic auditory pleasure of music.

The “cream effect” is the extra, the “unnecessary” to speak in the vocabulary particularly to cultures patterned by Protestantism. Cultural history and ethnography have yet to explore the complex connection between guilt and pleasure and the victory of one over the other in specific instances and settings. Late capitalism with the assistance of scientific research has achieved a certain return of sensory pleasure, but it is, as is typical of Ulrich Beck’s risk society (1992), pleasure laden with reflection and cost.

Dogs and cats are brought to old age homes because it has been scientifically established that the pleasure of touching their breathing and purring fur-clad bodies improves the wellbeing of lonely, elderly people – but only once a week, since of course it costs something. Newborn babies receive foot massages, because it enhances their sensory awareness and improves parent-child bonding, so say the studies, but parents have to enroll in a course on how to do it properly. Should you accidentally discover a sensory pleasure not yet charted and disciplined, you will face the difficult choice of relishing it (guiltily?) all by yourself, or carrying it to the market, after it has been properly studied, so that others might purchase it, in moderation, with guidance and thus avoid the otherwise unavoidable uncertainty and guilt over what might be too much of a good thing.

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