

Materialism: our controlling addiction

► The question is whether we will ever learn that there is more to saving the Earth than buying all the right things.

Buy only what you need. It's a common refrain of the environmental movement, and it's good advice — as far as it goes. But who's to tell me what I "need" rather than what I simply want? It's often difficult to tell the difference between necessities and extravagant consumption, especially when the inadequacies for which we try so hard to compensate are emotional, irrational and profitably exploited by advertising. But for our spirit's sake — as well as for the sake of the planet — we had better try, or we'll soon lay waste to both in our search for a better life.

In many of our purchases — major as well as minor — we are motivated by needs whose origin is not physical but psychological, such as the desire to assert our individuality, prove our independence, announce our achievements or reinforce our flagging self-confidence. It's an awfully difficult appeal to resist: the Product as Solution. Smiling indulgently at so-called primitive cultures who, seeing a solar eclipse throw spears at the moon, we deal with our fears by throwing consumer products at our shadow.

Buying all the right things, we hope to find in the opinions of others a comforting reassurance of our worth. It's not long-distance we're paying for: it's Intimacy. It's not beer we're buying: it's Friends and Companionship. Modern marketing has long since abandoned the relatively simple strategy of advertising goods or services based on claims of their quality, preferring instead to offer us a vision of the product's almost mythic potency, encouraging us to imagine the hero/ine we *could be* if only we buy this product. It's not a car we're buying: it's Freedom. Not a deodorant: it's An Aura Of Competence.

Fully prepared to admit that advertising stretches the truth just a little, we nevertheless reason that, if only *half* of what is claimed can be believed, then surely this product will offer *some* advantage. And even when the newest acquisition fails to meet our exaggerated expectations, we are quick to internalize the fault ("See, I *told* you I'm just not as good as everyone else . . . I'm so pathetic that even *this* doesn't help . . .") and promptly seek relief in something else. So long as we continue to believe that we can "prove" our value through the magical power of the Product, try to pacify our lonely and wounded inner child with presents, we will only reinforce our image of ourselves as incomplete and inferior — and remain the perfect mark for manipulative advertising.

Keenly aware of our anxieties about our appearance, our popularity and our desire to find true love, advertising (with its handmaiden, market research) has developed an array of frightfully effective ways to arouse our fears and to suggest, through emotionally charged words and pictures, that their remedy is to be found in mass-produced products. That these products never completely succeed in satisfying those (primarily emotional) needs *ought* to make clear the futility of trying — but instead, it only provides advertisers the means to employ the exact same techniques again and again and again. It is like buying sugar in a sieve, or like the hypnotist at a carnival who can slip the watch from your wrist and return it to you, only to take it again and again — without you ever catching on how it's done. But this time, they don't plan to give it back.

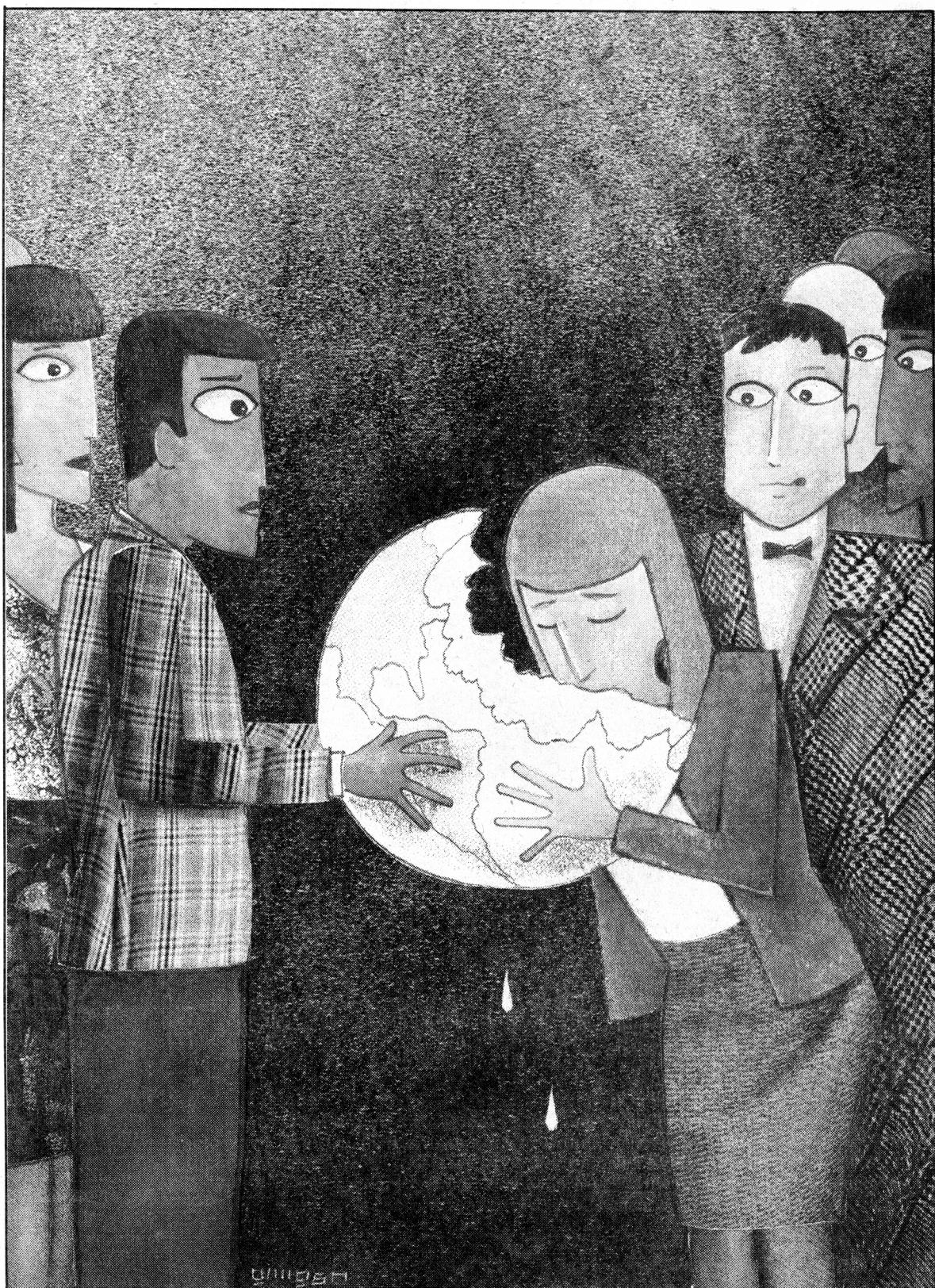
As the primary source of the information used to provoke and manipulate our fears, the market research industry has done very well out of the current recession. Desperate to maintain their market share, companies continue to pour millions of dollars into studies looking for the psychological keys to consumers' wallets. The keys, thanks to the thousands of us who participate nightly in focus group discussions, are made increasingly accessible — permitting a bizarre kind of emotional blackmail in which, for a nominal fee, the victim-to-be willingly provides all the necessary secrets.

There is a real genius at work here. And it will surely cost us the Earth.

Currently, one of the most effective techniques is by appearing to respond to the demand for greater corporate environmental responsibility for waste, pollution and over-packaging. Capitalizing on the growing public awareness of environmental problems, advertisers have succeeded (again, with the help of market research) in maintaining a secure market for ever more products — using "Green," "Recyclable" and "Environmentally-Friendly" to promote the notion of guilt-free consumption. Like "New and Improved" and "All-Natural" before them, such labels are but the latest in a long series of public relations gimmicks with no meaning beyond their value in engineering the all-important "positive product profile."

A particularly disturbing element in this strategy is the subtle (yet unmistakable) assurance that the solution to the environmental crisis as proposed by industry and traditional politics lies in "buying all the right things" — and therefore requires no more of a sacrifice on our part than we are now expected to make in dealing with our personal problems. Instant Solutions, Ready-Made.

Its success dependent on our absolute faith in the quick fix, an economy based on ever-increasing consumption actively discourages us from participating fully as citizens by substituting the token gesture of buying and voting for meaningful involvement with



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It is becoming all too evident that our consuming passion will cost us the Earth.

our selves and with our community. The more we allow public debate to be restricted to the viability or effectiveness of competing economic "packages," the more rapidly and completely will we lose sight of both any alternative goals for public policy and our responsibility for shaping that debate. Increasingly and unwittingly we find ourselves unable to do anything but choose between essentially identical ideologies and, frustrated by a sense of powerlessness, merely vote (or not vote) and walk away. We prefer to invest our energies in the pursuit (however futile) of more tangible and immediate rewards, leaving the definition and execution of important public policy to others.

The main feature of a market-driven economy is that it presupposes — indeed it demands — an equally market-driven society: a society in which all problems are defined simply as either a lack of Some Thing or the money to buy Some Thing. Of primary importance in this society would be the responsibility of teaching everyone, adults and children, those with money as well as those without, that their place depends directly on their ability and willingness to amass the established and recognized symbols of success.

Having been successfully conditioned to look to objects to meet our needs, it is inevitable that we begin to look at other people the same way: to define and assess our relationships with others in terms of their ability to meet our needs for friendship, comfort or sex. It is abundantly clear that a great deal of contemporary advertising is based on the claim that such-and-such a product will procure the appropriate human companion — in the desired mood, and at the appointed hour. The Personals section of any major city newspaper will attest to just how effective such advertising has been: We now Shop For People.

Like any addiction, our dependence on material possessions is a way of trying to cope with our fears of inadequacy. Like any other form of addiction, it promises to keep us "safe" from the secret and terrifying belief that we "just don't measure up"; an image of ourselves so unbearable that we're driven to seek refuge in a bottle, a drug or an endless stream of fashionable accessories. The moment of purchase can be a powerfully mood-altering experience, as we anticipate our escape into the haven of the Instant Solution promised by advertising.

In this popular form of substance abuse (where

the substance in question is the planet's limited resources), it is the thousands of industrial processing plants that do our smoking for us — with the only-too-predictable result that the smoke is having on the Earth's atmosphere. Our buying habits, like arson, succeed in boosting the local economies by creating jobs to replace what's been consumed — while managing to keep the fire damage confined (mostly) to the developing countries.

This pressure on the planet's resources is not only the greatest threat to our environment, but is also a major factor (through the increase in personal debt) in further deepening the current recession — and worsening the despair and social distress experienced by those effectively shut out of the noble consumer class. To break this habit and reclaim our self-respect we need only remember that no one can make us feel inferior without our consent.

So we're *not* everything we would like to be. Who is? But it's certain that we'll never resolve our doubts about our worth while we're busy trying to accumulate the empty symbols of wealth and power.

It should be no surprise that political candidates are sold like soap; it is, after all, the same hidden needs that are so effectively exploited, the same tactics meeting with the same great success. This was Reagan's genius: By appealing to our already well-established dependence on "the Shopper's Solution," he created a whole new political class: the Willingly Disenfranchised.

Longing for simple answers to a myriad of complicated problems, we seek someone capable of (at least promising) an easy solution. There, there. Never mind. Go on about your business. Father Knows Best. All too often, we opt for a candidate whose manner actually and actively discourages us from looking too closely at the cost of the "solution" — a solution that, on close inspection reveals clearly the financial and political agenda of its designers, and to whom the candidate now owes allegiance for the success of his campaign.

It allows the powerful to continue to get away with murder — while we amuse/abuse ourselves with stupid pleasures because, as advertising has learned all too well, we are most effectively controlled . . . by only what we need.

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