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## CURRENT BOOKS

### Consuming Visions

**LAND OF DESIRE:** Merchants, Money, and the Rise of a New American Culture. *By William Leach. Pantheon. 510 pp. \$30*

The American critique of consumer culture is embedded in an honorable but narrow tradition. From Thorstein Veblen to John Kenneth Galbraith, Vance Packard to Christopher Lasch, critics have assailed the captains of commerce for fostering an obsession with material goods and distracting the populace from public duty. Although they articulated the critique in various secular idioms, all of these observers had inherited Protestant commitments to plain speech, plain living, and the independence of the individual self. They were haunted by the vision of the future evoked in Dostoevsky's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor": a docile mass society, preoccupied by reckless extravagance and sedated by packaged fun.

A little more than a decade ago, that critical tradition began to go out of style, among both popular and scholarly audiences. In the summer of 1979, cultural pessimism peaked. Soon after summoning Lasch to Camp David, Jimmy Carter denounced wasteful consumption habits and called for ecologically grounded sacrifice. Not much more than a year later, Carter was out of office, his warnings drowned out by Ronald Reagan's strategies of systematic denial. America was back, and weekly news magazines spoke of a "return to elegance"—which mostly meant stretch limousines and suspenders for stockbrokers. In academic circles, scholars re-examined the older critique of consumer culture and found it wanting. Some discovered the emancipatory potential in acts of consumption and the creative energies in commercial pageantry.

This was more than a shift in intellectual fashion. There were serious conceptual questions raised by social scientists such as Mary Douglas and Michael Schudson. The scolding Veblenesque attack on materialism over-

looked the nearly universal human tendency to make meaning from material objects. Goods have always served symbolic as well as utilitarian purposes, and advertisers' efforts to associate silverware with status or cars with sex were a recent and well-organized example of a widespread cultural practice. As Theodor Adorno once observed, Veblen's celebrated assault on "conspicuous consumption" in social, domestic, and religious life was really an "attack on culture," so much of which depended on apparently frivolous display.

Along with this antimaterialist bias, the existing critical tradition revealed other limitations as well—a distrust of fantasy and play, a productivist ethic that implicitly devalued leisure and aesthetic experience, a failure to catch the affinity between consumer desires and ancient religious longings. The consumer's dream world, Adorno wrote, bears some resemblance to the "land flowing with milk and honey." Only if we acknowledged that resemblance could we begin to understand how the promise of modern advertising could exert such broad appeal. During the 1980s, revisionist scholars took up the challenge, avowing the utopian dimensions of consumer culture even as they sought to maintain a critical perspective on it.

On one point, though, nearly everyone agreed: Consumer culture emerged during the half-century between the Civil War and America's entry into World War I. Only a few historians of the colonial period claimed to have traced its origins to an earlier time. For most scholars and critics, the period 1865–1917 marked the watershed between Victorianism and modernity; the rise of national corporations selling brand-name goods and the transformation of department stores into palaces of consumption coincided with a "revolution in manners and morals" that overturned the ethic of fixed character and replaced it with a new emphasis on fluid personality. Rooted in these changes, a "hedonistic"

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consumer culture flowered in baseball parks, movie theaters, and dance halls—all sites of the new urban-based mass amusements. Victorian discipline dissolved. Some lamented its passing, others were jubilant.

Among the more influential of the celebrants was the historian William Leach, who insisted that consumer culture might well have been a liberation—especially for women—from the pinched, patriarchal world of rural republican virtue, and that the secular utopian faith was not entirely false. Leach was fascinated by the *joie de vivre* of the lavish

department-store spectacles staged during the early 20th century, and entranced by the imaginative new uses of color, glass, and light in store design. Like the old confessor envisioning the amusement park lights in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Absolution," Leach became convinced that things had gone "a-glimmerin'" in the metropolitan commercial landscape of the early 20th century. And like the boy in the story, Leach came to believe that "there was something ineffably gorgeous that had nothing to do

with God." Leach appeared poised to make a major case for the emancipatory potential of consumer culture, based primarily on the carnivalesque qualities of the urban retail scene.

**N**ow, Leach's *Land of Desire* has appeared. It is the fruit of a decade's worth of digging in archives, libraries, and private collections, of interviewing retired department-store buyers such as Dorothy Shaver (who became president of Lord & Taylor) and public relations counselors such as Edward Bernays (who staged media events

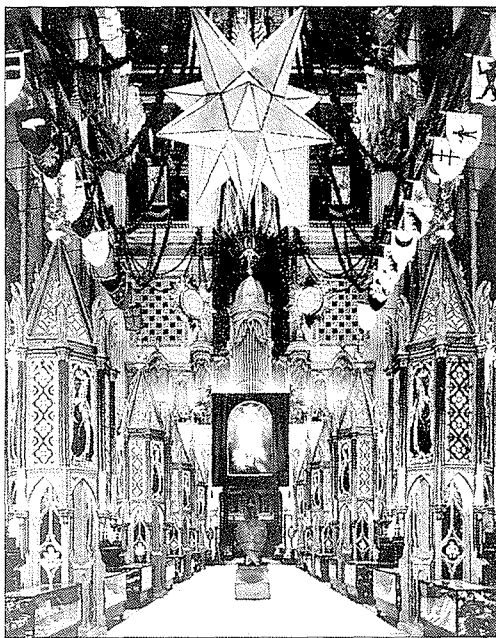
to dramatize the appeal of transparent velvet, featuring assorted models in alluring poses). The book is a remarkable achievement, an extraordinary synthesis of business and cultural history that casts new light on broad areas of American commercial life. Leach documents an efflorescence of theatricality and exoticism, especially during the years before America's entry into World War I. He describes spectacles designed to promote retail commerce, ranging from John Wanamaker's lush *tableau vivante* from *The Garden of Allah*, a steamy sentimental novel of 1904, to the opening of the

Coconut Grove nightclub in 1917. All the spectacular displays, all the color and light and glass, are here in abundance.

But they are accompanied by a detailed account of the "circuits of power" that lay behind and energized the spectacle—the network of moneyed men who set up the credit apparatus for entrepreneurs as well as consumers, who financed the expansion of retail chains, who fixed things with the

relevant government officials. Having uncovered this nest of investment bankers, real-estate brokers, and politicians, Leach is unable to sustain his enthusiasm for the emancipatory potential of consumer culture. On the contrary, he asserts that "the culture of consumer capitalism may have been among the most nonconsensual public cultures ever created," because it was produced by elites rather than the population as a whole, and because "it raised to the fore only one vision of the good life and pushed out all others."

That vision pervaded religion, literature,



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and the arts as well as commercial life. It combined a commitment to ceaseless acquisition with a smiley-face view of human fate. It was no accident that L. Frank Baum was the author of both *The Art of Shop-Window Display* and *The Wizard of Oz*, Leach claims; the latter book embodied the sanitized religion of mind-cure and positive thinking that seemed to suit consumer culture. *Oz*, as Baum saw it, was "a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out." The same could be said for the world of pure wish that department-store magnates fashioned to entice adults as well as children. In the 1890s as in the 1980s, a strategy of cheery and systematic denial obscured the destructive underside of ever-expanding consumption—the sweated labor that produced the elegant lace, the neighborhoods cleared to create new "business opportunities."

Leach has abandoned any sympathy for consumer culture and returned to the critical tradition he once rejected. What he does from within that framework is often most impressive, as when he writes that the consumer capitalist "conception of the desiring self" requires rejection of the most desirable capacities of human beings: "their ability to commit themselves, to establish binding relationships, to sink permanent roots, to maintain continuity with previous generations, to remember, to make ethical judgments, to seek pleasure in work, to remain steadfast in behalf of principle and loyal to community or country (to the degree that community or country strives to be just and fair), to seek spiritual transcendence beyond the self, and to fight a cause through to the end." This is a moral critique that, however familiar, remains necessary and eloquent.

Nevertheless, Leach's framework could have been more capacious, both historically and conceptually. The main historical problem is that Leach clings to a dualistic scheme, juxtaposing 19th-century producer culture with 20th-century consumer culture, assuming that the latter marked a fundamental departure

from the former. Thus he scants the carnivalesque elements in 19th-century commerce—the exoticism and theatricality, the protuberant flesh and gaping orifices, just as he neglects the puritanical elements in 20th-century management—the preoccupation with personal efficiency, with systematic control of one's self and environment. Tensions between release and control persisted throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, but the idioms used to orchestrate harmony shifted from moral to managerial. The fundamental process, though, remained the same. One might call it the containment of carnival.

European carnival tradition celebrated the temporary upending of social authority amid an overflow of sausages, wine, sex, and aggression. By the 1600s the carnival was merging with the market fair, a congregation of peddlers, acrobats, musicians, and traveling scoundrels; in such a setting, hierarchies were not so much overturned as dissolved amid the centrifugal movements of the throng. Although in market fairs as well as carnivals the dissolution was temporary, both venues may have provided a *frisson*, a sense of fluid selfhood and awakened possibilities for personal transformation. Exotic goods—jewelry, silks, spices, fragrances, and elixirs—might seem to possess an almost magically regenerative power, to promise a transfiguration of everyday identity. As market exchange spilled over boundaries of time and place, the magic of goods was unmoored from traditional animistic frameworks and set afloat amid a society of mobile, shape-shifting selves.

In the United States, these developments took place later and faster than in Europe. The point men of capitalist modernization were the itinerant peddlers who swarmed across the countryside throughout the 19th century, selling exotic finery as well as utilitarian items, bringing the carnivalesque promise of magical self-transformation in a bit of silk, a pair of earrings, or a regenerative patent medicine. But in the United States, as in Europe, established elites sensed the need to stabilize the

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sorcery of the marketplace, to control the centrifugal movements of commercial culture. Institutional remedies such as peddler licensing laws, the growth of credit reporting, and the enforcement of contractual obligations were supplemented by a morality of self-control and plain dealing; all of these measures were designed to counteract chaotic economic expansion and a flourishing subculture of sensuality—to contain the carnival of American commerce.

By 1900, new structures of containment had appeared. The reorganization of the economy under the dominance of major corporations brought bureaucratic rationality to commercial institutions; a new managerial culture recast the morality of self-control in a secular, pragmatic idiom. Rather than plod along a path of disciplined, steady work, ambitious young managers were urged to cultivate a more demanding regime of personal efficiency. The “chief end of man,” psychologist G. Stanley Hall announced in 1920, “is to keep ourselves, body and soul, always at the very tip-top of condition.” The emerging performance ethic evoked metaphors of electricity: the “live wire” provided the “vital spark” that kept the “whole system” humming. Such language captured the managerial emphasis on dynamic energy subordinated to a smoothly functioning, ever-growing corporate economy.

Yet economic growth could not be secured by managerial controls alone. As Simon Nelson Patten (whom Leach discusses) and other economists began to understand, the avoidance of periodic crises induced by overproduction required the maintenance of a mass-consumer market. Somehow even lumbering oligopolies had to sustain the aura of variety and unpredictability that had attracted people to the marketplace since the great 16th-century fairs of Leipzig and London.

The carnival atmosphere had to be evoked, but also sanitized and controlled. In national advertising the sanitizing pattern became clear by the 1920s. Not only were male

and female ideal body types remade on slimmer, more youthful, and more uniformly Anglo-Saxon models, but exotic settings faded in favor of the bland and the familiar—the soda fountain and the suburban neighborhood. Yet to preserve some semblance of vitality, advertisements had to seek out and incorporate vestiges of spontaneity and excitement in the popular arts. One example of this strategy was the use of comic-strip formats in the 1930s. The comics had been a boisterous product of urban commercial culture, bursting with burlesque humor and barely suppressed rage, sometimes rising to a vernacular surrealist art form—as in Winsor McCay’s “Little Nemo.” Advertisers appropriated comic forms and shackled them to leaden, didactic, and ultimately self-parodic narratives about lonely girls triumphing over b.o. and soiled underwear to win the hearts of their hypercritical husbands-to-be. This was the dominant pattern in managerial advertising—the containment of carnivalesque fantasy with literalist realism.

Yet the carnival was still in town, in the retail shopping districts. Leach demonstrates this with abundant descriptions of Orientalist fantasies enacted in restaurant murals and Turkish harems set up in shop windows. It was as if all the exoticism of 19th-century commercial culture, having been largely excluded from the official iconography of corporate capitalism (national advertising), had survived and flourished in retail stores, restaurants, and movie theaters. Perhaps this was partly because the managerial culture was overwhelmingly WASP, and the retail trade more heavily Jewish. Whatever the reason, the distinction underscores some of the fault lines between economic elites, and suggests that consumer culture was hardly monolithic.

Yet even on the retail side, the impulse toward rationalization was at work. As Leach perceptively observes, during the 1920s John Powers’ modeling agency (and others like it) promoted a “standardized conception of female beauty” and “freed . . . modeling from its



association with loose, off-color theatrical living . . . by connecting it with 'naturalness,' and 'the all-American way.' " This was the sort of shift that was also occurring in national advertising. An even clearer illustration was the transformation of Macy's Thanksgiving parade, which began as one of the "ragamuffin parades" that were "probably rooted in European traditions of carnival," Leach observes. Macy's replaced this undisciplined gathering of the people out of doors with a clean, well-managed spectacle of technological display—gargantuan, helium-filled Katzenjammer Kids, Santa Clauses arriving by airplane and zeppelin: a foreshadowing of the theme park fun of the late 20th century.

The fundamental pattern of 20th-century consumer culture, at least at the level of national advertisers and big-ticket retailers, has been the effort to conjure up the promise of unpredictability, excitement, and magic—while at the same time subordinating that promise to a broader agenda of control. Indeed, as Simon Patten realized, the successful maintenance of equilibrium in the "economy of abundance" required a balance between routinized work and consumption-dominated leisure. Far from undermining commitments

to work, Patten believed, the glittering world of goods would be the carrot that kept the worker showing up every day, seeking more money to buy more things. It was as if Patten foresaw the implicit bargain that would be struck between labor and management during the late 1930s, the bargain that formed the basis for the triumph of American consumer culture during the midcentury decades: steady work and a family wage in exchange for restricted union

demands and labor discipline.

Now business has abandoned that bargain and fled overseas in search of cheaper labor. The institutional base of consumer culture, a well-paid working population, has begun to crumble.

For the first time in decades, we have the opportunity to think about alternatives. The productivist tradition needs to be opened up and rendered more flexible. We need to realize that the problem with consumer culture is not materialism, but antimaterialism: a tendency, through the promotion of planned obsolescence and stylistic novelty, to disconnect human beings from sustained, sensuous connection with the natural or manmade world. And we need to revive an anthropological perspective on the cultural meanings of goods, a recognition that material artifacts can acquire symbolic, even sacramental meaning—not merely as status markers but as bonds between past and present, memory and desire.

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