Beyond Consumerism: ‘alternative hedonism’ and cultural politics

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Heidi Cody poster: alphabet comprised of brand logo letters
The Bratz & Bratz Boyz Secret Date Collection pairs each Bratz character with a mystery Bratz Boy, two champagne glasses, and “tons of date night accessories”. It is marketed at six year olds’. (Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy*, Schribner, NY, 2004, p215)
GO GIRL
(EAN:9771470272)
Lifestyle magazine containing articles on fashion, beauty, reader stories, celebrities, songwords, puzzles, quizzes and posters; everything that is important in the life of girls aged 7-11.
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Disenchantment with consumerism

- Other conceptions of pleasure and fulfilment are gaining more of a hold…
- Current forms of affluence are seen as compromised by their negative by-products or viewed as pre-emptive of other enjoyments…
The Voicings of Discontent

- Are low-key, diffuse, politically unfocussed.
- But the regrets and disquiet are real enough.
- And speak to a sense of the opportunities we have squandered in recent decades for enjoying more relaxed and less narrowly reductive ways of living.
The HPI shows that around the world, high levels of resource consumption do not reliably produce high levels of well-being (life-satisfaction), and that it is possible to produce high levels of well-being without excessive consumption of the Earth’s resources.
Self appointed world ‘leaders’ – the G8 - score generally badly in the Index: The UK comes a disappointing 108th – with the remainder of the G8 faring little, if at all, better. Italy is 66th, Germany 81st, Japan 95th, Canada 111th, France 129th, United States 150th and Russia 172nd.
'...ever since the ground-breaking work of Abraham Maslow and Manfred Max Neef, psychologists and alternative economists have set out to demonstrate that, far from there being any automatic increase in wellbeing for every increase in levels of consumption, much of our current consumption is turning out to be a very inadequate surrogate for meeting human needs in a more satisfying, durable way'. (Sustainable Development Commission)
‘For those of us with huge overdrafts at the Bank of Hours-in-the-Day, the real luxury is time. Time with the kids, phone switched off. Or time for yourself, to read and relax in peace. Luxury is a long lunch recovering the person you love, or a gourmet dinner with friends, cooked to order and served by your own private pool. It’s me-time. Family time. The elusive holy grail of modern life.’

(Coastline holidays at: www.coastline.co.uk)
Consumer society: the paradox

Is now becoming increasingly dependent for its continued flourishing on our collective preparedness to spend the money we earn by working too hard and too long on the goods which help to satisfy the goods we have increasingly sacrificed through over-work and over-production.
‘Alternative Hedonism’

- Responds to the current crisis as an opportunity for moving to a fairer and more life-enhancing use of resource.
- Its special focus is therefore on the downsides of the consumerist lifestyle.
- Is premised on the idea that even if consumerism were sustainable it would not enhance happiness beyond a point already reached.
‘Alternative hedonism’ claims…

- The Euro-American consumerist model is unlikely to be checked in the absence of a seductive alternative – of an altered conception of what it is to flourish and to enjoy a ‘high’ standard of living.
- The chances of shifting to a less rapacious consumption, and hence of reducing social and environmental exploitation, are dependent on the emergence and embrace of new modes of thinking about human pleasure and self-realisation.
Distinctive to its critique…

- Its focus on desires implicit in current expressions of affluent consumer anxiety and disaffection
- It engages with an actually emergent culture of consumer equivocation: is therefore grounded in an already-existing ‘structure of feeling’
- Can appeal to that in legitimating claims about the less attractive aspects of consumerism.
- Hence offers an immanent critique of ‘consumerism’- which departs from much earlier opposition to the shopping-mall culture…
‘Alternative Hedonism’
therefore

- Has a distinctive normative positioning…
- Adopts an approach to needs and welfare policy that avoids both left-wing patronage or ‘dictatorialism’, and complacent affirmations of ‘sovereign’ consumer choice…
- Offers an anti-puritan conception of potential consumer pleasures and fulfilments…
An ‘alternative hedonist’ response on need...

- will reject the ‘back to the Stone Age’ conception of its agenda as failing to recognise its innovative quality
- highlight the more backward, puritan and ugly aspects of a work-driven and materially encumbered existence
- challenge the presumption that ‘progress’ and ‘development’ are synonymous with speeding up and saving time
Anish Kapoor ‘Cloud Gate’ sculpture, Chicago
Anish Kapoor, ‘Sky Mirror’

Anish Kapoor's *Sky Mirror* is a breathtaking, 35-foot-diameter concave mirror made of polished stainless steel. Standing nearly three stories tall at the Fifth Avenue entrance to the Channel Gardens at Rockefeller Center, *Sky Mirror* offers a dazzling experience of light and architecture, presenting viewers with a vivid inversion of the skyline featuring the historic landmark building at 30 Rockefeller Plaza.
Fernandez Arman *Long Term Parking* 1982
Erwin Wurm, ‘Fat Convertible’ (MOMUK, Vienna)
A pesticide ad from the early 1950s. For many, gardening became a military operation: new "miracle" pesticides promised to liquidate unwanted plants and animals.
13 mg TAR 1.1 mg NICOTINE
SMOKING KILLS
Health Departments’ Chief Medical Officers
Beauty is only skin-deep. “Best Premium Sports Car in Initial Quality” is to the bone.

The Corvette is a lot more than just another pretty face. And you don’t have to look very far to realize just how true that is. According to J.D. Power and Associates, Chevrolet Corvette ranked as The Best Premium Sports Car in Initial Quality. It’s all part of our commitment to create a sports car that makes the world in performance, technology and quality engineering, corvettes.com

THE ANSWERING MACHINE
FOR THE CALL OF THE WILD.

From a secluded mountain state to deep in the urban forests, the call of the wild is for us. And the 1997 Toyota 4Runner, available to allow Freedom on the Wheel Drive, is one of the only machines capable of answering that challenge. With a powerful 3.4L 24-valve engine and the highest ground clearance in its class, you’ll be able to handle almost anything nature may throw at you. And with62,000 miles of road tested and available weather-resistant seats, the 4Runner is never missing out. The 1997 Toyota 4Runner. Just answer for the call of the wild.

TOYOTA / BRENNER
I love what you do for me.
Barbara Kruger

I shop therefore I am
You are seduced by the sex appeal of the inorganic
Kieron Dwyer
"Consumer Whore"
Graphic, 1999
YOU'RE RUNNING
BECUASE YOU WANT THAT RAISE,
TO BE ALL YOU CAN BE.
BUT IT'S NOT EASY
WHEN YOU
WORK
SIXTY HOURS A WEEK
MAKING SNEAKERS IN AN
INDONESIAN FACTORY
AND YOUR FRIENDS
DISAPPEAR
WHEN THEY
ASK FOR A RAISE.
SO THINK
GLOBALLY BEFORE YOU DECIDE
IT'S SO COOL
TO WEAR

NIKE
BUY NOTHING DAY
NOVEMBER 24
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Chris Jordan True Portrait Of An Oil Company