# RE-IMAGINING THE AMERICAN DREAM

*by Elizabeth Thoman*

re: action

Like most middle-class children of the fifties, I grew up looking for the American Dream. In those days there were no cartoons in my Saturday viewing, but I distinctly remember watching, with some awe, "Industry on Parade." I felt both pride and eager anticipation as I watched tail-finned cars rolling off assembly lines, massive dams taming mighty rivers, and sleek chrome appliances making life more convenient for all. When I heard the mellifluous voice of Ronald Reagan announce on GE Theatre that "Progress is our most important product," little did I realize that the big box in our living room was not just entertaining me. At a deeper level, it was stimulating an "image" in my head of how the world should work: that anything new was better than something old; that science and technology were the greatest of all human achievements and that in the near future-and certainly by the time I grew up-the power of technology would make it possible for everyone to live and work in a world free of war, poverty; drudgery; and ignorance.

I believed it because I could see it right there on television.

The American Dream, however, was around long before television. Some believe the idea of "progress" goes back to when humankind first conceived of time as linear rather than cyclical. Certainly the Judeo-Christian heritage of a messiah leading us to a Promised Land inspired millions to strive for a better world for generations to come.

Indeed, it was the search for the "City on the Hill" that brought the Puritans to the American colonies and two centuries later sent covered wagons across the prairies. In the 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans "never stop thinking of the good things they have not got," creating a "restlessness in the midst of prosperity" that drives them ever onward.

Even the U.S. Constitution only promises the pursuit of happiness. It doesn't guarantee that any of us will actually achieve it. It is this search for "something more than what we've got now" that is at the heart of the consumer culture we struggle with today. But the consumer culture as we know it could never have emerged without the invention of the camera and the eventual mass production of media images it made possible.

## Reproducing Pictures

In 1859 Oliver Wendell Holmes described photography as the most remarkable achievement of his time because it allowed human beings to separate an experience or a texture or an emotion or a likeness from a particular time and place - and still remain real, visible, and permanent He described it as a "conquest over matter" and predicted it would alter the physics of perception, changing forever the way people would see and understand the world around them. Holmes precisely observed that the emergence of this new technology marked the beginning of a time when the "image would become more important than the object itself and would in fact make the object disposable."

Contemporary advertising critic Smart Ewen describes the photographic process as "skinning" the world of its visible images, then marketing those images inexpensively to the public. But successive waves

dance and by the turn of the century, as media critic Todd Gitlin notes, "production, packaging, marketing, advertising, and sales became functionally inseparable."

The flood of commercial images also served as a rough-and-ready consumer education course for the waves of immigrants arriving on America's shores and the thousands of rural folk lured to the city by visions of wealth. Advertising was seen as a way of educating the masses "to the cycle of the marketplace and to the imperatives of factory work and mechanized labor"-teaching them "how to behave like human beings in the machine age," according to the Boston department store magnate, Edward A. Filne. In a work world where skill meant less and less, obedience and appearance took on greater importance. In a city full of strangers, advertising offered instructions on how to dress, how to behave, how to appear to others in order to gain approval and avoid rejection.

Granted, the American "standard of living' brought an end to drudgery for some, but it demanded a price from all: consumerism. Divorced from craft standards, work became merely the means to acquire the money to buy the goods and lifestyle that supposedly signified social acceptance, respect, even prestige. "Ads spoke less and less about the quality of the products being sold," notes Stuart Ewen, "and more about the lives of the people being addressed."

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In 1934, when the Federal Communications Commission approved advertising as the economic basis of the country's fledgling radio broadcasting system, the die was cast. Even though early broadcasters pledged to provide free time for educational programs, for coverage of religion, and for news (creating the famous phrase: the "public interest, convenience, and necessity"), it wasn't long before the industry realized that time was money-and every minute counted. But it was not until the 1950's that the image culture came into full flower. The reason? Television.

Television was invented in the 1930's, but for many years no one thought it had any practical use. Everyone had a radio, even two or three, which brought news and sports and great entertainment right into your living room And if you tired of the antics of Fibber McGee and Molly or the adventures of Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, you could always go to the movies, which was what most people did at least once a week.

So who needed television? No one, really. What needed television, in 19 0, was the economy. The postwar economy needed television to deliver first to America-and then to the rest of the world-the vision and the image of life in a consumer society. We didn't object because we thought it was, well, "progress."

## Progress at What Price?

Kalle Lasn, a cofounder of the Canadian media criticism and environmentalist magazine Adbusters, explains how dependence on television occurred and how it continues today each time we turn on our sets:

In the privacy of our living rooms we made a devil's bargain with the advertising industry: Give us an endless flow of free programs and we'll let you spend twelve minutes of every hour promoting consumption. For a long time, it seemed to work. The ads grated on our nerves but it was a small price to pay for "free" television. What we didn't realize when we made our pact with the advertisers was that their agenda would eventually become the heart and soul of television. We have allowed the most powerful communications tool ever invented to become the command center of a consumer society defining our lives and culture the way family, community; and spiritual values once did.[39]

This does not mean that when we see a new toilet paper commercial we're destined to rush down to the store to buy its new or improved brand. Most single commercials do not have such a direct impact. What happens instead is a cumulative effect. Each commercial plays its part in selling an overall consumer lifestyle. As advertising executive Stephen Garey noted in a recent issue of Media & Values, when an ad for toilet paper reaches us in combination with other TV commercials, magazine ads, radio spots, and billboards for detergents and designer jeans, new cars and cigarettes, and soft drinks and cereals and computers, the collective effect is that they all teach us to buy. We are supposed to feel somehow dissatisfied and inadequate unless we have the newest, the latest, and the best.

Just like our relatives at the turn of the century; we learned quickly to yearn for "what we have not got" and to take our identities from what we own and purchase rather than from who we are or how we interact with others. Through consuming things, through buying more and more, we continue the quest for meaning which earlier generations sought in other ways - conquering the oceans, settling the land, building the modern society, even searching for transcendence through religious belief and action. With few places on Earth left to conquer, the one endless expanse of exploration open to us is the local shopping mall.

39. http://www.adbusters.org

## Transcending Materialism

Thus the modern dilemma: Few of us would turn in our automatic washing machines for a scrub board or exchange our computers for a slide rule, and we cannot expect the images of the past to provide the vision for the future. We must recognize the tradeoffs we have made and take responsibility for the society we have created.

For many today, the myth of "progress" is stuttering to a stop. The economic slowdown of the early nineties presents only the most recent example of the human suffering created by the boom and bust cycles of the consumer economy. But even if some magic formula could make steady economic growth attainable, we can no longer afford it. The Earth herself has set material limits. Unlimited exploitation in the name of "progress" is no longer sustainable.

True progress, in fact, would be toward a materially renewable lifestyle that would fulfill the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of all-not just some-of the world's people, while allowing them to live in peace and freedom. Under such a system, communication's most important aim would be to bring people together. Selling things would be a part of its function, but not the whole.

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Disasters like Chernobyl and the Alaskan oil spill raise hard questions about the long-term social impact of technological innovation. In the U.S., the loss of whole communities to the ravages of drugs, crime, and homelessness threatens the very principles that allow any humane society to flourish. At the same time, the global events of 1991 -the breakup of the Soviet Empire, the struggles for national identity, even the rise of fundamentalist governments in many parts of the Third World-bear witness to a growing desire for meaningful connections as well as material and political progress.

In many ways we are living in a new world, and around that world hungry eyes are turning toward the Western democracies' long-standing promises of freedom and abundance-the promises the media has so tantalizingly presented. Yet behind the media culture's constantly beckoning shop window lies an ever-widening gap. West or East, North or South, the flickering images of the media remain our window on the world, but they bear less and less relationship to the circumstances of our day-to-day lives.

Reality has fallen out of sync with the pictures, but still the image culture continues. We'll never stop living in a world of images. But we can recognize and deal with the image culture's actual state, which might be characterized as a kind of midlife crisis-a crisis of identity. As with any such personal event, three responses are typical:

1) Denial. Hoping that a problem will go away if we ignore it is a natural response, but business as usual is no solution.

2) Rejection. Some critics believe they can use their television dials to make the image culture go away, and urge others to turn it off, too. But it's impossible to turn off an entire culture. Others check out emotionally by using drugs, alcohol, or addictions of all kinds to vainly mask the hunger for meaning that comes when reality and images don't converge.

3) Resistance. A surprisingly active counterculture exists and is working hard to point out the dangers of over-reliance on the image culture. But such criticism is negative by its very nature, and critics tend to remain voices crying in the wilderness

A positive alternative is needed. What I have called media awareness-the recognition of media's role in shaping our lives and molding our deepest thoughts and feelings-is an important step.The steps I have outlined above provide simple but effective tools for beginning to work through this process. Although they seem basic, they have their roots in the profound state of being that Buddhism calls mindfulness: being aware, carefully examining, asking questions, and being conscious. Even a minimal effort to be conscious can make day-to-day media use more meaningful. Being conscious allows us to appreciate the pleasure of a new CD album and then later turn it off to read a bedtime story to a child. Being conscious means enjoying a TV sitcom while challenging the commercials that bait us to buy. Being conscious allows us to turn even weekend sports events into an intergenerational get-together. But however it is achieved, media awareness is only a first step. Ultimately, any truly meaningful attempt to move beyond the image culture needs to recognize the spiritual and emotional emptiness that material objects cannot fill.

To move beyond the illusions of the image culture we must begin to grapple with some deeper questions: Where is the fine line between what I want and what all in society should have? What is the common good for all? Or to rephrase Gandhi: How do we create a society in which there is enough for everyone's need but not everyone's greed?

Thousands of years ago Plato wrote of a cave of illusion in which captive humans were enraptured by a flood of images that appeared before them while they ignored the reality outside the cave. This prophetic metaphor contained its own solution. Once again we are summoned into the light. □

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