You Are What YOU BUY

ACCORDING TO ADVERTISING GURU JAMES TWITCHELL, EVERY SYMBOL, FROM ALKA-SELTZER'S SPEEDY TO THE ENERGIZER BUNNY, PLANTS POWERFUL NOTIONS OF WHO WE ARE

ALONG WITH TWO FRIENDS WHO NEED A NEW PLASTIC DISH DRAINER, JAMES Twitchell, professor of 19th-century poetry at the University of Florida in Gainesville, is visiting a Wal-Mart. Twitchell gazes raptly upon the aisles stacked with TV sets in boxes, and picnic baskets and T-shirts and beach balls. So much mass-produced stuff! Twitchell is energized—as any dedicated scholar would be upon entering an archive packed with new material.

"Look at this wire shopping cart—it's the equivalent of the Las Vegas poker chip," he says. "In a casino, instead of gambling with your real money, you use little colored plastic disks, so it seems OK. This huge cart is something like that: it's so roomy you don't feel you're buying too much. Marketers fooled around with the size of these carts, getting them just right."

Twitchell loves this stuff. He loves it so much that he has switched from teaching and writing solely about Romantic-era poetry to buzzier issues, such as adolescents wearing dungarees slung low to reveal their Joe Boxers, and whether the Jolly Green Giant is an avatar of Zeus. And now, reveling in all these bedspreads and CD players and croquet sets and yellow raincoats, Twitchell tells his friends that one reason he began studying such fine points of mass marketing is that his parents, long ago, denied him Wonder Bread.

Twitchell's father, a Vermont physician, dismissed Wonder Bread as "air and water." His mother warned that Coca-Cola was sugar water that would "rot your teeth." Now he keeps a cellophane-wrapped loaf of Wonder Bread and an aluminum can of Coke—icons among American consumables—atop his computer monitor. In one of Twitchell's recent books, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism*, he wrote that everything he loved as a youth

BY RICHARD AND JOYCE WOLKOMIR

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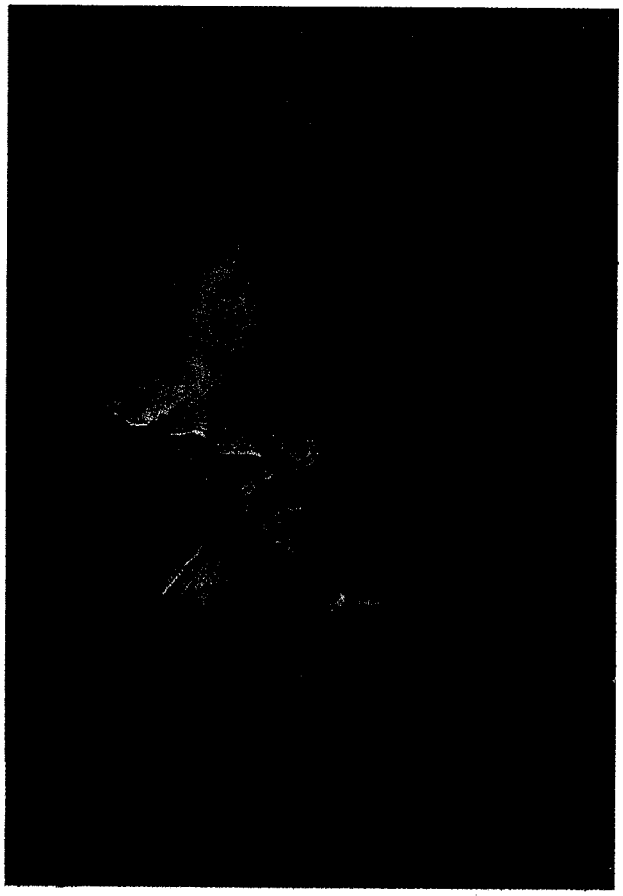

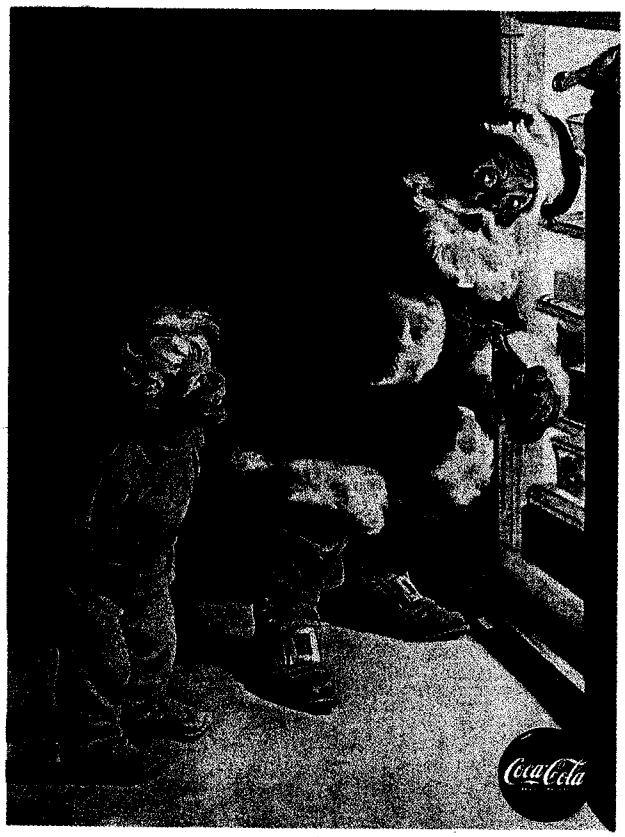

was from the forbidden mass culture: "It was mass produced, mass marketed and consumed en masse." And if he wanted to savor Pepsi and Whoppers and Dairy Queen sundaes, he had to do it on the sly, "for we would not countenance them inside the family circle."

Twitchell—who is now in his 50s, trim and urbane—says his study of mass culture, especially advertising, began 15 years ago, when he was teaching a class on the Romantic poets. "I suddenly realized my students had no interest in what I had to say." He asked them to complete a line from Wordsworth: "My heart leaps up when I behold a _____ in the sky." Nobody could supply the missing "rainbow," but his students could flawlessly recite the contents of a Big Mac: two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles and onions on a sesame-seed bun.

"It was an epiphany," he says.

At the time, the much-discussed book by E. D. Hirsch, et al., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know*, argued that cultures need the glue of shared knowledge, like who Napoleon was or where Beirut is. "I realized he was right, we do need a body of information," explains Twitchell. "But he was wrong about what body of information we share, because it isn't from high culture—it's from pop culture, the world my students knew so well." His students knew little about Dickens or Keats. "But they could recite the 'Mmm, mmm good' Campbell's Soup jingle," he says. "They didn't know Rembrandt, but they could tell you Ben's and Jerry's last names." Twitchell was stunned. "I wanted to know why the stuff they knew was so powerful it pushed my stuff out of the way."

Since then, he has been observing himself, his law professor wife, his two daughters, now grown, his colleagues, students, neighbors. He has invited himself into advertising agencies as an academic gadfly on the wall. He has explored advertising's history. And he has learned the average adult now encounters some 3,000 advertisements every day, from bus flanks to messages over the telephone as the caller waits on hold. He has probed the impact of all that mass marketing in such works as *ADCULTUSA* and his latest book, *Twenty Ads That Shook the World*.

Academics usually excoriate modern materialism as spiritually deadening and socially corrupting, he observes. "My own take is that humans love things, and we've *always* been materialistic, but until the Industrial Revolution only the wealthy had things—now the rest of us are having a go at arranging our lives around things." Especially in the past

By co-opting John Everett Millais' painting *Bubbles* in 1886, Pears' Soap blurred the line between advertisements and art; Coca-Cola employed a chubby-cheeked Santa Claus to boost winter sales.

Clutching his childhood taboos—Coke and Wonder Bread—advertising analyst James Twitchell sits atop his archives.

20 years, young people have had lots more money to spend. "Now they're driving the market for mass-produced objects." And especially for youths, Twitchell maintains, advertising has become our social studies text. "Ask 18-year-olds what freedom means, and they'll tell you, 'It means being able to buy whatever I want!'"

But advertising's job is not just urging, "Buy this!" Twitchell cites 1950s ad ace Rosser Reeves, who created a television commercial in which a hammer clangs an anvil to remind viewers how a headache feels (or maybe to induce one) while reporting good news: Anacin is "for fast, Fast, FAST relief. . . . " Reeves would hold up two quarters. It was advertising's task, he said, to make you believe those two quarters were different. Even more important, the ad had to persuade you that one of those quarters was *worth more.*

To illustrate the process, Twitchell points to 1930s ads claiming Schlitz steam-cleaned its beer bottles. What the ads omitted was that all brewers steam-cleaned their bottles. Thus, through advertising, the company achieved "ownership" of product purity—it created for itself what the ad industry calls a USP (Unique Selling Proposition).

According to Twitchell, it was in the Victorian era that mass culture reared up, driven by the steam-powered printing press, which spewed out text and images and notions for the "mob." Victorians invented the word "mob," he says, by shortening the Latin *mobile vulgus*, "rabble on the move." Victorian education strove to differentiate literature from pulp novels, to show classical music's superiority to dance-hall tunes, to instill "art appreciation." But with the machine age churning out cheap goods, consumerism was erupting all over, and so was advertising.

Thomas J. Barratt, the 19th-century manufacturer of Pears' Soap, noted: "Any fool can make soap. It takes a clever man to sell it." And Barratt was just that man. "The manufacture of soap is a turning point in civilization," says Twitchell. Originally, farmers boiled animal fats with wood ashes and molded the result into soap balls, which soon stank. With the machine age came soap concocted from caustic soda and vegetable fats, pressed into bars that lasted forever. But one soap was much like another.

In 1881, at James Gamble's soap factory in Cincinnati, a worker forgot to turn off the mixing machinery, inadvertently producing a batch of soap so air-filled it floated. Gamble claimed his new soap, Ivory, floated because it was pure—in fact, 99 44/100 percent pure.

Earlier, England's Andrew Pears—the father-in-law of Thomas J. Barratt—had developed a translucent soap. It seemed a natural to appeal to the class-conscious Briton's desire for whiter skin, versus a laborer's weathered tan. Barratt got the message across in such ways as plastering his company's new slogan, an early version of Nike's "Just Do It," on walls all over the British Empire: "Good Morning! Have You Used Your Pears' Soap?"

The manufacturer of Pears' Soap noted, "Any fool can make soap. It takes a clever man to sell it."

But Barratt's greatest coup was co-opting *Bubbles*, a John Everett Millais painting of the artist's angelic grandson watching a just-blown soap bubble waft upward. Barratt sold Millais on the notion that, distributed as a free poster, his painting would reach thousands upon thousands of potential new art lovers, for their edification. For their further edification, Barratt had a cake of the soap lying in the painting's foreground, inscribed "Pears'."

Branding made advertising possible. In the early 1800s, soap was just soap. Like biscuits or nails, it came in barrels,

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Ads create and then promise to absolve you of secular sins, such as halitosis or dandruff.

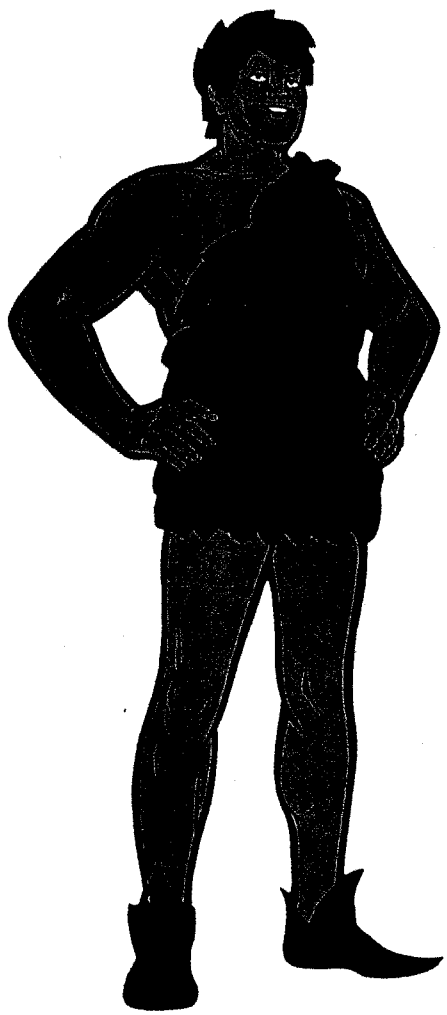
and to get some, you told the store clerk, "Two bars of soap, please." By the late 1800s—nudged by Barratt's advertising—you might specify Pears' Soap.

Twitchell says Barratt's hijacking of art to sell soap "blurred, for the first time and forevermore, the bright line between art and advertising, between high culture and the vulgar, between pristine and corrupt." Today, art co-opted by advertising is so commonplace we do not blink at Michelangelo's *David* wearing Levi's cutoffs.

Back in the Wal-Mart, Twitchell veers toward a barrel displaying kitchen floor mats. "Two for five dollars!" he says, reading a sign. It is clearly tempting. Two floor mats, one price. But he pulls himself away from the alluring floor mats to ruminate about literature. "I'm supposed to teach English Romantic poetry," he says. "That period, the beginning of the 19th century, is where many of our views on materialism came from, because that was when the Industrial Revolution began producing the surfeit of things that will cause the trouble."

Surpluses produced by the new technologies, like steam power, were particularly apt to pile up after wars, and that was especially true in the aftermath of the Civil War. "What it takes to win a war is the ability to produce more war materials than your opponent, but when the war ends you have too many blankets, boots, rifles, and too much patent medicine—which was the subject of the first real advertising," he explains. "In the 1870s we had the rise of advertising, along with the rise of newspapers, and now we start talking about two nostrums or two pairs of boots as if they were different, when we know they are the same."

Modern advertising, Twitchell insists, learned its stuff from religion. "I grew up a Vermont Congregationalist. My father was a doctor in our town, and his father had been a doctor in our town, and my mother's family had lived around there since the Revolution." His was, except for Wonder Bread denial, a stable life. "In the world where I grew up, you knew who you were by a series of time-tested anchors—ancestry, land, religion, where you went to school, your accent, your job—but we've been rapidly losing those anchors," he argues. "One marriage out of two ends in divorce, the average person changes jobs seven or eight times during a lifetime." With the old determinants of social position shifting or gone, he says, "we're starting to build our identity around driving a Lexus or displaying Ralph Lauren's polo player on our shirt."



The original Jolly Green Giant made children wail; he was re-created as a friendly strongman.

He notes that many of modern advertising's founders had religious backgrounds. A Baptist minister's son, Bruce Barton, cofounded the large ad agency Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborne (which comedian Fred Allen suggested sounded like "a trunk falling downstairs"). Artemas Ward, who wrote psalms to Sapolio Soap, was the son of an Episcopal minister. John Wanamaker, whose marketing genius helped create the modern department store, once considered becoming a Presbyterian minister. Rosser Reeves, creator of the Anacin anvils, was the son of a Methodist minister.

Twitchell contends that these founders of modern advertising, and others like them, modeled their messages on parables they heard in church. He sketches a typical TV commercial in which someone is distressed. Perhaps it is a young woman, if the product is a dish detergent. Perhaps it is a middle-aged man, if the product is a cold remedy. The heroine or hero consults another person who gives witness: a certain product "works miracles." The product is tried. Relief! Ads create and then promise to absolve you of secular sins, such as halitosis or dandruff, or "ring around the collar" or "dishpan hands."

But Twitchell says that advertising also reaches back to paganism. Instead of Zeus in the clouds and dryads in trees, we have televisions that are inhabited by the Jolly

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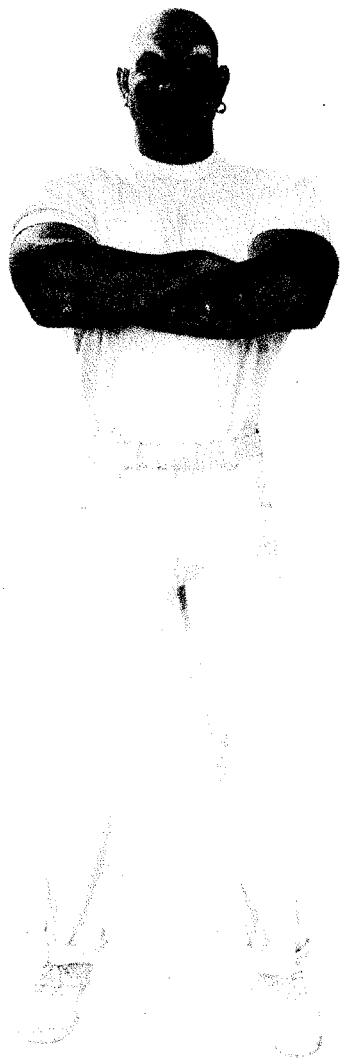
Green Giant, the Michelin Man, the Man from Glad, Mother Nature, Aunt Jemima, the White Knight, the Energizer Bunny and Speedy Alka-Seltzer with his magical chant: "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz. . . ."

Commercial culture is so potent, Twitchell believes, that it has "colonized" society. For instance, Christmas was low-key until the 1800s, when stores reinvented the holiday to sell off their surpluses. On December 24, 1867, R. H. Macy kept his Manhattan store open until midnight, setting a one-day sales record of more than $6,000.

Santa started as "a weird conflation of St. Nicholas (a down-on-his-luck nobleman who helped young women turn away from prostitution) and Kriss Kringle (perhaps a corruption of the German *Christkindl*, a gift giver)." Today's familiar Santa, Twitchell continues, originated in the 1930s, because Coca-Cola's sales slumped in winter. Ads began showing Santa—in his modern persona—relaxing in a living room after toy delivery, quaffing a Coke apparently left for him by the home's children. "Coke's Santa was elbowing aside other Santas—Coke's Santa was starting to own Christmas."

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was a 1930s creation of a Montgomery Ward copywriter. And Twitchell says Kodak ads universalized the tradition of blowing out birthday-cake candles and other "Kodak Moments" to "show what you can do with fast Kodak film and the Kodak Flashmatic attachment on your Kodak camera."

Ads have even changed our attitude toward debt, which once could lead to prison. "Think only of how consumer debt was merchandised until it became an accepted habit, not an abhorred practice," observes Twitchell. "Think only of how the concept of shine and 'new and improved' replaced the previous value of patina and heirloom." Twitchell says politics hit its modern ad-driven stride starting with the 1952 "Eisenhower Answers America" Presidential campaign, designed by Rosser Reeves. Regarding his own ads, Ike said ruefully: "To think an old soldier should come to this."



Two-fisted "grimefighter" Mr. Clean rescued housewives from drudgery and dirt.

Athletes have become logo-bedecked living billboards. But Twitchell argues that commercial culture has affected us all. Cereal, for example, is now synonymous with breakfast. "Before Messrs. Post and Kellogg, this meal consisted of breaking fast by finishing last night's dinner," he says, adding that leftovers went to the family dog. Dog food was a creation of Ralston Purina's ad agency. Twitchell says that some marketing ploys fizzled, of course, citing an old ad headlined: "Sunday is Puffed Grain Day."

Mother's Day began in the early 1900s when Philadelphia merchandiser John Wanamaker elevated to stardom a local woman mourning for her mother. He ran full-page ads in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Soon only a blackguard would fail to buy Mom a present on her newly special day. Wanamaker reportedly gloated that he would rather be the founder of Mother's Day than the king of England.

Twitchell is no longer amazed that his students, inundated with commercial messages, display their status with manufacturers' logos on their shirt pockets or on their sunglasses. "At a Palm Beach store a woman explained to me that the more expensive the sunglasses, the smaller the logo, so that with Cartier you can barely see the C." His students derogatorily refer to certain classmates as "Gaps," after the retail chain where they buy their clothes. In the 19th century, people learned manners from novels and magazines; in the 20th from sitcoms and ads. When his daughter was a teenager, he heard her telling friends, after watching a teen TV show, *90210*, "Can you believe how cool Kelly looked in Dylan's Porsche!" Twitchell shrugs: "That's all they have for Trollope."

Economist Thorstein Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption": displaying possessions to impress others. "Between ages 15 and 25, we males consume the most as a percentage of our disposable income because we're displaying our feathers to potential mates," says Twitchell. "Now it's more complicated because females are working and they can display too."

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Levi's appropriated Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco for this 1970s ad in which God gives Adam life—and a pair of jeans.

But the urge wanes. "After about age 45, many people start moving away from acquisition. Thus, ads, TV shows, and movies, which are studded with paid-for product placements, concentrate ferociously on youths, who seem to get the message.

But not all analysts agree with Madison Avenue's youth fixation. In fact, according to Beth Barnes, an associate professor at Syracuse University and chair of the advertising department at the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, advertisers are increasingly recognizing that the over-45 age-group is growing fast. And older Americans often have the magic ingredient: disposable income. "I think the change is slow, but inevitable," Barnes says. For one thing, she notes, advertising is increasingly segmented, exploiting today's highly segmented media to aim fine-tuned messages at specific subcultures, including age-groups. "Advertising for soft drinks may stay aimed at youth," she says. "But the trick is to go after older people with products in which they are not set in their ways—computers, for instance, or travel and tourism, or financial services, or new products, like Chrysler's PT Cruiser."

"Often advertising is not about keeping up with the Joneses, but about separating you from them."

About a year ago, marketing circles buzzed over the surprising number of over-45 on-line shoppers. "It makes sense. They're amazingly machine savvy—my mother just got a new computer because her old one was too slow."

It is true, Barnes continues, that younger people may be less loyal to brands, and easier to woo away. But she adds: "There's a flip side to that—young people are lot more skeptical too!"

Perhaps. "Why," asks James Twitchell, "are my daughters willing to buy a bottle of water worth two cents and pay $1.50?" They aren't buying the product itself; they're buying the values that advertising has attached to the product, such as being hip. He cites a Madison Avenue adage: "You don't drink the beer; you drink the advertising."

Many of today's ads leave the average reader or viewer totally confused about what is being sold. For instance, in one current TV commercial, a cool young couple is driving down a city street, their car's windshield wipers clacking. They are so tuned in, they notice that the passing scene is rife with tempos, such as a boy bouncing a basketball, all in perfect sync with the rhythmic clack of their windshield wipers. What is going on?

"Often advertising is not about keeping up with the Joneses, but about separating you from them," Twitchell points out. "That's especially true of advertising directed at a particular group, such as adolescents or young-adult males—it's called 'dog-whistle' advertising because it goes out at frequencies only dogs can hear." In this case, the

LEVI STRAUSS & COMPANY

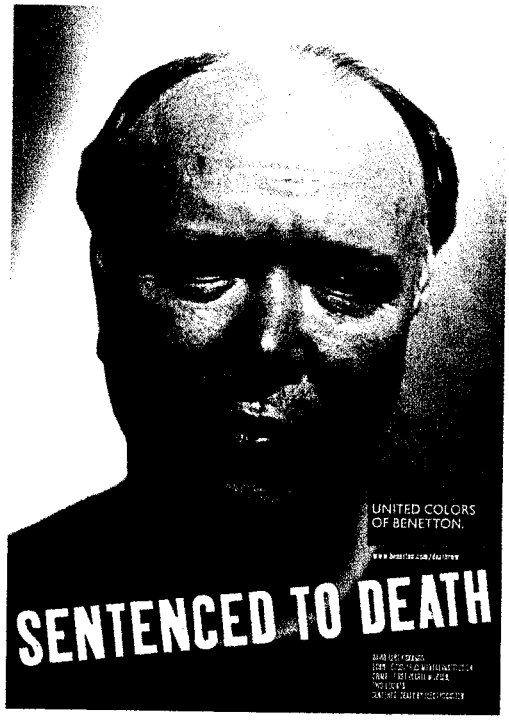
Such an ad may look senseless to a 50-year-old, "but it's being properly decoded by a 23-year-old."

"dogs" are the commercial's target group of young adults. The young couple is hip enough to be driving their model of Volkswagen. "The idea is, your parents can't understand this, but you can." He cites a recent advertisement for a new sport utility vehicle that actually has the headline: "Ditch the Joneses!"

The most egregious example of this oblique marketing ploy was, of course, Benetton's spate of ads that employed the force of shock in order to create product recognition. The image of a nun and a priest, locked in a passionate kiss, was offensive to many people. But the pièces de résistance were Benetton's portraits of 25 death row inmates in America's prisons. This ad campaign cost Benetton its lucrative contract with Sears, Roebuck & Company and ended Oliviero Toscani's 18-year career as Benetton's creative director.

Such an ad may look senseless to a 50-year-old, Twitchell says, "but it's being properly decoded by a 23-year-old." It works. Today's average American consumes twice as many goods and services as in 1950, and the average home is twice as large as a post-World War II average home. A decade ago, most grocery stores stocked about 9,000 items; today's stores carry some 24,000.

Twitchell says he does not believe for a minute that our commercial society is a better world. "But it might be a safer world, oddly enough, if we value machine-made objects about which lies are told, rather than feuding over how to save souls," he says. "And we may be moving into a quieter world as people who were never able to consume before begin getting and spending."



Public outcry forced Benetton to kill its "shock" ad campaign showing portraits of death row inmates.

He points upward, to the Wal-Mart's ceiling, with its exposed girders, pipes, wires and ducts, painted industrial gray. "That's to give you the illusion that you're buying stuff as close to the factory as possible," he says. His eyes fix upon Kraft Macaroni & Cheese boxes, each inscribed "The Cheesiest." He says, "It looks like a cornucopia, and the message is, 'Take one!' And see, the stack still sits on its freight pallet, to give you the idea there aren't many middlemen between you and the factory price."

Everything in the store is a brand-name product. "See, a stack of Fedders' air conditioners in their boxes. It was Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton's great insight that if he sold only branded items and negotiated lower prices, the manufacturers would do all the advertising for him."

Twitchell wanders back to the alluring display of floor mats that had first attracted his eye. He stares, transfixed. "Two for five dollars! I came in here meaning to buy one. That idea of two seemingly for the price of one took hold in the 1940s, especially with Alka-Seltzer, which you originally took as only one tablet until they halved the dosage so you'd take two: 'Plop, plop. . . . '"

A few steps farther, he eyes a display of bottled mineral water. "This one is made by Pepsi. When they studied its marketing in Wichita, they were astonished to find out that buyers of these lower-priced mineral waters didn't care if it came from underground springs or runoff from Alpine glaciers—they bought the water because they liked the name and the feel of the bottle in their hand."

He pauses at a rack of greeting cards. "It's how we exchange emotions now, the commercializing of expression. The most touching are the cards to send to kids, offering your sympathy because their parents just got divorced." Such cards perform a useful service. "They're facilitators of difficulty, and they help us handle emotionally fraught events quickly and efficiently."

As his friends prepare to leave the Wal-Mart, without the dish drainer they had sought, Twitchell stops. "I'm going to go buy those two floor mats, but after you leave, because I'm ashamed to be seen succumbing to that two-for-the-price-of-one deal," he says.

Even so, Twitchell—deprived as a boy of Wonder Bread and Coke—believes the stuff cramming our stores, which advertisements strain to get us to buy, is not necessarily invidious to our cultural health. "After all," he says, "we don't call them 'bads'—we call them 'goods!'" ♜

Richard and Joyce Wolkomir's article "Reading the Messages in Everyday Things," about John Stilgoe, appeared in April 2000.

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