
Reviews

I Shop, Therefore I Am

The strange American need to consume, as portrayed in *Affluenza*.

Ann Monroe

Television Review: Scott Simon, *Affluenza* (KCTS/Seattle and Oregon Public Broadcasting: 1997).

A reporter friend of mine, years ago, told me about doing an interview with TV's "Mr. Rogers"—in his home, not his neighborhood. His living room was as big as my friend's apartment, he reported, complete with grand piano. But the reason he remembered the interview wasn't the luxury; it was that to Rogers, this was living simply.

It's all in how you look at it, I kept reminding myself as we sat in the living room of our rented beach house watching *Affluenza*, the PBS special due to be aired September 15. (By now everyone should know to check those all-important local listings.) "We" was me, my husband, our friends Susan and Pete, and their son Tadd—and our stuff. And we had plenty of stuff: three laptop computers, CD player, radio, microwave oven, cordless phone, cell phone, and of course the television and VCR that made it possible to watch the show in the first place. This is the simple life?

Not according to National Public Radio's Scott Simon, host of this good-humored and often goofily funny hour-long special surveying what it describes, only half in jest, as a catastrophic modern-day plague. In a fast-moving montage of old ad clips, satire, statistics, and analysis, Simon and his producers list the symptoms of "affluenza": shopping fever, chronic stress, a rash of bankruptcies, fractured families, and social disarray.

The statistics are astounding. More Americans are expected to declare bankruptcy this year than to graduate from college. The average American parent shops six hours a week and spends 40 minutes playing with the kids. The percentage of Americans describing themselves as very happy reached its high in 1957 and has been going down since. In the town of Colorado Springs, where taxpayers have refused for 25 years to increase school funding, the superintendent of schools is selling ads in school buildings and on school buses.

The show spends quite a bit of time in Colorado Springs, where—it notes—even the Christian Right, gung-ho as it is for capitalism and free enterprise, seems to suspect things have gotten out of hand. "The market brings in new consumers at any price," complains Focus on the Family's Glenn Stanton. "Pitting children against their parents is going too far."

"The majority of people are rushing to get a little more, and it's got to stop," says Pastor Ted Haggard of New Life Church. As he speaks, he is sitting at a bucolic picnic table, clad in a Wilson (as in tennis racket) T-shirt, shooing off a goat that's nibbling at his Bible.

THIS RAMPANT consumerism, according to Simon and his producers, goes against a deep strain in the American character—a strain into which the show shoehorns characters as diverse as the Pilgrim fathers, Ben Franklin, Teddy Roosevelt, and Jimmy Carter. And here's where we all began arguing with the TV screen, even as we howled at the "uncommercials" put together by the Canadian Adbusters group.

Some of our complaints sprang from sheer discomfort, of course. Okay, so there are good reasons for those computers (like writing this review)...but *three* of them? "I buy Nikes because they're comfortable," insisted Tadd during a segment on how kids get hooked on brand names. Pete exclaimed in outrage as Jeremy Rifkin used tuberculosis to prove that until this century, to be a consumer in America was a bad thing (after all, TB was called consumption).

"Ben Franklin was one of the bad guys," sniped Susan. And I countered the almost-obligatory shots of starving children (in the global miseries segment) with guilt-trip accusations.

But as I watched *Your Money or Your Life* authors Vicki Robin and the late Joe Dominguez (to whom the show is dedicated) wax eloquent about simplifying your life, I did begin to wonder just what was going on here. The movement is growing by leaps and bounds, said one participant. But when Susan canvassed New York bookstores for a copy of *Voluntary Simplicity*, another book touted on the show, she couldn't find a single one—or even a store that had heard of it.

Perhaps the hour's strangest moment is a clip showing Nike employees eagerly participating in a workshop on voluntary simplicity. I couldn't help wondering if any of them had thought about what might happen to their jobs if this movement became widespread. Exactly where did they think they'd be, if teen-agers all over the world started wearing their Nikes until they developed holes?

And that, of course, is the rub. Yeah, we'd be better off if we simplified our lives. But we live in a Ponzi-scheme economy where not just corporate fortunes, but people's jobs, from the United States to Poland to Thailand, depend on the ever-increasing appetite for *things* that the advertising industry so skillfully fuels. Getting enough folks off that treadmill to avert the environmental disasters *Affluenza* threatens is likely to be not the uncomplicated blessing the show promises, but a messy and possibly ugly process.

But the *Affluenza* producers can't really be blamed, in an hour-long show, for skipping lightly over a few awkward areas. We had a ball watching it, even when we squirmed. So tune in. Invite your friends over. Invite their stuff over. Have a rummage sale.

Who knows, when we get home, we might even get rid of one of those computers.

When not on vacation, ANN MONROE writes for a variety of magazines, including Sojourners and Mother Jones. She thanks John Howe, Susan Schaeffer, Pete Schellenbach, and Tadd Schellenbach for their valuable assistance. Affluenza. Scott Simon. KCTS/Seattle and Oregon Public Broadcasting, 1997.

