



PAPER 6 – SHOPPING

The following two passages focus on shopping and consumerism.

In the first passage Neal Lawson, writing in *The Herald* newspaper, discusses our addiction to shopping.

Passage 1

We are caught up on a treadmill of turbo-consumption powered by the unfounded belief that having more will make us happy. We are part and parcel of a consumer society whose credentials are becoming more tarnished.

5 Increasingly, the predominant thing that you and I do is to shop and plan our lives around things we have to pay for: the clothes, jewellery, cars, houses, holidays, restaurants and gadgets that make us what we are. Once we were a society of producers, knowing ourselves and each other by what we did and what we made. Not any more. Today we understand ourselves and project the image we want others to see through what we buy.

10 Even for those who pretend they are above fashion, every item they own is based on finely calibrated decisions about who and what they are and what they want others to think of them. With every purchasing decision, they reject thousands of other options, on other parts of the shelf, in other shops, in order to home in on the object that is 'them'. It might not be 'fashion' but it is *their* fashion. Today we are all what we drive and what we wear. We don't own things – they own us.

15 So what keeps us running on the consumer treadmill? We buy freedom, escape, love, care, excitement and comfort. We buy to belong to a particular social group and stand apart from others. And, of course, we buy status. We want to be as near the top of the herd as possible. Endless consumption fuels the instinct to be 'the best', to covet the newest car, to wear the latest outfit, to travel to ever-more exotic places, to possess the latest gadgets
20 and to own a prestigious home in a 'desirable' area.

The whole show is kept going by the vast laboratory of designers, producers, marketers, advertisers, branding experts, psychologists and retail consultants who devise the machinery for the image factory that defines the 21st century. The best brains in the world are engaged in continually engineering new wants into new needs: more and more things
25 we must have in order to be 'normal'.

But life on the treadmill is catching up with us.

Most frightening of all is the fact that there are so few other ways of expressing our humanity, so we increasingly take comfort in so-called 'retail therapy'. Yet the object of the sellers is to make us not satisfied but dissatisfied so that we soon go back for more.
30 Shopping rewards us just enough to leave space for more ... and the emptier we feel the more we shop. It is the most vicious of vicious circles, and the paradox at the heart of Western society, which is based on the pursuit of 'more'.



35 How, then, do we escape from the treadmill of consumerism? There is no going back to some rose-tinted pre-consumption era. Shopping isn't all bad, after all – it's an important means by which we can be sociable and creative. However, we need to strike a balance, and that means regaining control over a marketing machine that has the sole purpose of making ever greater profits. We require a more compelling vision of what it means to be free and live a good life. Shopping sells us a powerful myth of liberty: that the car sets us free on the open road, for instance, when the reality is that we spend hours sitting in

40 choking traffic jams that get us nowhere and pollute the environment. We must grasp the fact that what we really need and cherish cannot be bought.

Perhaps the state needs to step in, and we must demand that it legislates to help us rebalance our lives as social beings and citizens, rather than simply as shoppers. A good start would be legal restrictions on advertising – particularly to children, who shouldn't

45 be subjected to the full force of the branding psychologists. Just as Sweden has banned advertising to under-12s, we need to do the same.

Other governmental measures could include increased taxation on luxury goods – thus signalling that status isn't gained by buying top-end merchandise. Finally, happiness – not wealth – must become the number one priority, which means replacing the GDP (gross domestic product) with GWB (general wellbeing) as a measure of the nation's prosperity.

50 The quality of our lives, not the quantity of our consumption, should be the measure of political success.

In the second passage, which is taken from the first chapter of a book on design, *The Language of Things* by Deyan Sudjic, a commentator on architecture and design, the writer discusses the importance of design in influencing purchasing decisions. *

Passage 2

To start with the object that is closest to hand, the laptop on which I write these words was bought in an airport shop. There is no one but me to blame for my choice. Some shops are designed to seduce their customers. Others leave them to make up their own minds. Dior and Prada hire prize-winning architects to build stores on the scale of Grand Opera

5 to reduce shoppers to an ecstatic consumerist trance. Not airports. A generic discount electronics store at Heathrow is no place for the seductions, veiled or unveiled, of the more elaborate forms of retailing.

Yet even in an airport, buying is no simple, rational decision. Like an actor performing without makeup, stripped of the proscenium arch and footlights, the laptop that

10 eventually persuaded me that I had to have it did it all by itself. It was a purchase based on a set of seductions and manipulations that was taking place entirely in my head. And to understand how the laptop succeeded in making me want it enough to pay to take it away is to understand something about myself, and maybe a little about the part that design has to play in the modern world.

15 By the time I reached the counter, even if I didn't know it, I had already consigned my old
Apple computer to the electronics street market in Lagos where redundant hard drives
go for organ harvesting. Yet my dead laptop was no time-expired piece of transistorised
Neolithic technology. In its prime it had presented itself as the most desirable and most
20 knowing piece of technology that I could ever have wanted. It was a computer that had
been reduced to the aesthetic essentials. Just large enough to have a full-size keyboard,
it had a distinctive, sparely elegant ratio of width to depth. The shell and the keys were
all white.

Apple's designers were quick to understand the need to make starting a computer for
the first time as simple as locating the 'on' switch. They have become equally skilled at
25 manipulating the exterior design to create visual obsolescence. They take the view that
Apple's route to survival in the PC-dominated world is to use design as a lure to turn its
products into aspirational alternatives to what its competitors are selling. It expects to sell
fewer machines, but it charges more for them. This involves serial seduction. The company
has to make the most of its customers so hungry for a new product that they will throw
30 away the last one every two years.

At Heathrow, there were two Apple models to choose from. The first was all white, like my
last one. The other was the matt black option. Even though its slightly higher specification
made it more expensive, I knew as soon as I saw it that I would end up buying it. The
black version looked sleek, technocratic and composed. The purist white of my last one
35 had seemed equally alluring when I bought it, but the black one now seemed so quiet, so
dignified and chaste by comparison. The keys were squares with tightly radiused corners,
sunk into a tray delicately eroded from the rest of the machine. The effect was of a skilfully
carved block of solid, strangely warm, black marble, rather than the lid on top of a box of
electronic components.

40 Black has been used over the years by many other design-conscious manufacturers to
suggest seriousness, but it was a new colour for Apple. Black is a non-colour, used for
scientific instruments that rely on precision rather than fashion to appeal to customers.
To have no colour implies that you are doing would-be customers the honour of taking
them seriously enough not to try fobbing them off with tinsel. Of course this is precisely
45 the most effective kind of seduction.

And in the end black too becomes an empty signal, a sign devoid of substance, and I will
no doubt fall for the next model that sets out to seduce me with its exclusive and tasteful
credentials.