

Distraction, destruction, deliverance: the presence of mindscape in marketing's new millennium

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Abstract

Marketing-driven consumer culture is often indicted in the degradation of the ecosphere. Futurists envision an ecological crisis in the new millennium. Marketing and consumer research can be enlisted in the aversion of this crisis. Political and philosophical regimes of environmental reclamation and redemption must be mobilized by conversion experiences in the individual's soul. In this paper, I propose that marketers instigate millenarian activities to trigger a revitalization movement in the service of ecotheology. Such a provocative enterprise is well suited to the discipline's posture of eminent domain at century's end. I offer some suggestions for the shape that such a revitalization might take.

A lot of people, young and otherwise – but especially those from, say, the mid-teens to mid-30s – become disillusioned when they get the sneakers with the lights in them, and they have the new avocado-colored Salad Shooter, and they have the jacket with Michael Jordan's picture on the back, and they realize that it's not enough. People wonder: What the hell? What's wrong here? What's missing? ... What's missing in their connection to the universe (George Carlin in Taylor, 1999).

Introduction

Let me begin by acknowledging the postmodern penchant for perpetual re-invention and re-making, and embrace the spirit of renewal heralded by the new millennium. I adopt a millenarian posture in this essay, and argue the need for marketing-driven consumer countercultures to emerge from the excesses of our late twentieth century enthusiasms. I lobby for the rise of one such movement in particular. While these remarks are grounded in empirical experience, they are nevertheless entirely normative and quirkily idiosyncratic in character. They do not reflect the views of [marketing] management, but they ought to.

Corridor conversations with Kellogg colleagues have long provided me with grist for the interpretive mill. Sid Levy has continually reinforced my interest in the deep structure of human motivation. Phil Kotler's insights remind me constantly that marketing is too important to be left up to marketers. Recently, Rob Kozinets and I have had a running dialogue on the implications and consequences of America's leading exports to the world – munitions and entertainment, the "destruction" and "distraction" of my title – for planetary quality of life. Add to these conversations an immersion in the writings of deep ecologists

and radical economists, whose ideas I often mull over between portages on long, solitary wilderness canoe trips, and you have the recipe for, if not an anarchist cookbook, at least a consumerist's guide to macro-marketing strategy.

Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin's prescient observation, Stuart Ewen (in Boihem and Emmanouilides, 1996) envisions consumer culture as encouraging us to experience our own destruction as entertainment of the first order. Taking a similar critical tack, Neil Postman (1985) imagines us amusing ourselves to death. Marketing has long been accused of distracting consumers from nobler, more enlightened pursuits, and on occasion has been employed to stave off the destruction its critics foresee as its ultimate end. Proponents of demarketing (Kotler and Levy, 1971) suggest that the technology of influence can be used to counter marketing's more egregious excesses. But curbing our appetitive drive is an insufficient corrective. Our ardent desire to fetishize artifacts – in contemporary life most notably products and technology – or to substantivize or entify categories (Ernst, 1999) must be harnessed to salvific end.

As I have argued at length elsewhere (Sherry, 1995), marketing is among the most powerful forces of cultural stability and change at work in the world today. I also believe that as a system of ideology and praxis, marketing must evolve rapidly in a more pro-social manner if the new millennium is to have a happy ending. This means evolving beyond green marketing, as we currently understand it (Cairncross, 1992; Fuller, 1999; Smith, 1998; Wasik, 1996) toward a consumer-friendly variant such as the ambitious program of social engineering the Viridian movement envisions (Sterling, 1999). It means moving beyond voluntary simplicity as a consumption strategy (Elgin,

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1993; Shi, 1986). It also means massive maze-way reconstruction for the individual consumer if marketers are to catalyze sustainable development (Callenbach *et al.*, 1993; Hawken, 1993; O'Connor, 1994).

Ecology and scenario planning

As a way of helping my MBA students avoid unanticipated and unintended consequences of their decisions as marketers and consumers, I engage them early in the term in a discussion of macromarketing ecology. The discussion is heavily influenced by theorists such as Garrett Hardin (1985) and William Catton (1982), and it provokes students to think processually and systemically about the myriad ramifications of their marketplace behaviors. Also, by way of encouraging them to discriminate between projection and prediction as they attempt to understand and influence the future, I instruct them in the practice of scenario planning (Ringland, 1998; Schwartz, 1991). Arguably, in the United States, we spend much (if not most) of our time in the future, and probably for reasons linked more closely to escapism (Tuan, 1998) than to pragmatism; ironically, we have tragically short time horizons, as managers and as citizens.

I find my students react enthusiastically, if not hungrily, to this nested approach of contextual, holistic analysis and guided fantasy. They are especially intrigued by the identification of discontinuities, critical uncertainties and potential crises that may effect their lives. Resolution of these issues often plunges them into moral paradox, as they discover that their own short-term quality of life may be linked to their complicity in the degradation of ecosystems and cultures around the globe. What are neophyte managers, let alone their senior professor, to do about such a situation?

As the new millennium approaches, my students and I agree that the largest looming crisis appears to be ecological in essence, and that non-natural crises-in-waiting appear to have ecological aspects. As a consequence, I strive to ennoble the ecolate filter (Hardin, 1985), and remind students that they must be cultural ecologists as well as processual symbologists. I often imagine myself training semiotic ecologists, who might sustain the experiential pleasures of our delusional economic system while reversing the destructive structural tide the delusion has occasioned. And yet, this remains a

fantasy in the absence of explicit directives. If contemporary marketing and consumer behavior contribute to this looming millennial crisis, might they also nurture the seeds of revolution?

Millenarian marketing

Millenarian activities – which in contemporary society usually revolve around money – question the sources and allocations of power, and so are routinely suppressed as threats to the existing moral order, unless these competing views share some common ground (Burridge, 1969). Neoclassical economics has had no shortage of critics in recent years (McCloskey, 1985; Miller, 1995; Schmookler, 1993; Seabrook, 1990; Schumacher, 1989), and attempts to rehabilitate and humanize the discipline abound (Costanza, 1991; Etzioni, 1988; Naroll, 1983; Wolfe, 1989). If we accept that the goal of a postmodern economics is to keep the gains and reverse the losses of the Great Transformation (Lux, 1990; Polanyi, 1957), then perhaps we can agree that the common ground shared by competing marketplace worldviews is the restoration, cultivation and preservation of their literal common ground. Such agreement returns us inexorably to place.

Hans Küng (1991) has offered an insightful and provocative description of his quest for a global ethic alternative to market capitalism with which I largely agree in the particulars if not in his specifically doctrinal conclusion. He imagines a postmodern world characterized by freedom and justice, equality and plurality, brotherhood and sisterhood, coexistence and peace, productivity and solidarity with the environment, and toleration and ecumenism, a set of conditions requisite to survival itself. His global ethics has a theological foundation, with religious peace as its cornerstone.

Accepting that religion mobilizes behavior with unparalleled tenacity, but rejecting any of the so-called world religions as an ethical platform, my millenarian suggestion is for a return to nature as an ethical inspiration. Not nature worship *per se*, but the ennobling of ecology as both a (pan-)cultural focus and a fetish focus. And not ennobling in a teleological sense (whether Teilhardian, Bookchinian or Lovelockian in cast), but in a more agnostic one. [Ironically, as I revise this essay, a legal battle between Minnesota loggers and several consumerist groups may catalyze a court ruling on the status of deep ecology as a religion (Brauer, 2000).]

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Mindscape

Recently, I have drawn attention to the kinds of marketplaces we typically inhabit, and some of the placeways associated with them (Sherry, 1998). I typologize these marketplaces on two broad dimensions, along continua that move from natural to cultural, and from physical to ethereal. Landscape is a natural, physical marketplace, such as the wilderness and brandfest servicescapes of record (Arnould *et al.*, 1998; McAlexander and Schouten, 1998). Marketscape is a cultural, physical marketplace most commonly explored in our literatures. Cyberscape is a cultural, ethereal marketplace, currently unfolding rapidly in electronic media (Venkatesh, 1998). Mindscape is a natural, ethereal marketplace about which our literatures are relatively silent (Belk, 1987). Clearly, these marketplaces are ideal types, as the continua are more properly dialectical in character; thus each marketplace may partake of the dimensions of the others. Further, we are witnessing the conversion, transmutation and hybridization of these -scapes as the global marketplace evolves. This cartography will undergo much shape-shifting in the new millennium.

Let me focus on mindscape for the near term. Mindscape is metaphysical innerspace. It is the ground in which some of the most provocative and intriguing of marketing's trendy ideological seeds – the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) or the entertainment economy (Wolfe, 1991) – are falling. I would like to move beyond such seductive but ultimately distracting reductions of mindscape to virtual reality, New Age shamanism, commodity Zen, improvisational retail theatre, televoyeurism, pharmacological vacation, or biochemical regulation. I hope, by the time I have finished, the reader will not suspect me of binging on some entheogen (let us call it Lorax). Mindscape is not simply the ground of the merely fantastic. It is the wellspring of the imagination. It is the font of philosophy, a discipline that has provided too little consolation of late. The enlightened cultivation of inner space, and in particular the recovery of the geomantic axis of the marketplace, is essential to any hope of sustainable development in the new millenium.

In his recent work, Casey (1997) has comprehensively and eloquently demonstrated the ontological primacy of place. Inquiry into utopian discourse is a hallmark of much of the current consumer research literature on marketplace

atmospherics (Maclaran and Stevens, 1998; Maclaran *et al.*, 1999; Sherry, 1998; Shields, 1992). A general revival of interest in placeways is spreading rapidly through the social sciences. I suggest that this growing preoccupation with sense of place has to do with our *fin de siecle* feelings of existential homelessness, the psychic consequences of the physical and metaphysical mobility we've endured at century's end, our struggling efforts to transform the geography of the placeless (Relph, 1976) by imposing the architecture of reassurance (Marling, 1997) upon the nonplaces (Augé, 1995) of our experience. By returning our interest to mindscape, I'd like to reground our utopian fantasies in the ritual substratum of consumer behavior.

One of the more enduring contributions arising from the so-called "interpretive turn" in consumer research (Sherry, 1991), is the refocusing of our attention on the sacral aspects of consumption (Belk *et al.*, 1989), that is, on numinous, exalted, transcendent experience. Repudiating the ostensible disgodding of nature in their investigations of the re-enchantment of the world, researchers have explored the ways in which consumers (re-)animate objects (such as brands and products) in meaningful acts of co-creation with marketers (Chang, 1998; Fournier, 1998; McGrath *et al.*, 1993; Sherry, 1995, 1998). In the United States, a nation of unchurched seekers is laboring to reinvigorate spirituality in non-denominational forms, and marketers have reacted with alacrity to this trend (Abrahamson *et al.*, 1998; Coombe, 1998; Smith and Clurman, 1997; Spyer, 1998; Twitchell, 1996, 1999).

Now that branded products have become household gods (Sherry, 1986), mindscape must become the site of millenarian activity, the host of a revitalization movement (Wallace, 1956) that is part paraprimitive and part parapostmodern solution. In short, a techno-ideological transfer is indicated, a back-to-the future embrace of organic animism that re-replaces commodity Zen in the natural world. What I am proposing is an eleventh hour, fifth column marketing intervention that is a curious hybrid of agnostic or pantheistic animism and ecumenical ecology, a joint venture between science, religion and humanism. I'm thinking along the lines of a scientifically formulated animism philosophers call *hylozoism* (Fox, 1990, p. 46), but with a rapturous tinge. Who better than marketers, some of whom best understand both the saving graces and fatal flaws, the virtues as well as the vices of consumer culture, to

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broker such an alliance? After all, "the market can perform only as well as the intellectual disciplines that guide and feed it" (Lane, 1991, p. 593).

Mindscape and mazeway reconstruction

I am not advocating a "regressive Utopianism" (Ryle, 1988, p. 24) so much as I am wondering how a progressive one (Callenbach, 1975) might be catalyzed. Neither am I content to espouse a straightforwardly political experiment in social re-engineering (Kemp and Wall, 1990; Manes, 1990; Selznick, 1992) no matter how essential political activity will be in creating the new world order that oiko-phillic paradigm-shifters envision (Henderson, 1991; Maynard and Mehrrens, 1993; Millbrath, 1989). That would be placing the infrastructural cart before the superstructural horse, an especially premature exercise, given the Trojan nature of the horse I have in mind.

We live in a world where our primary experience of the numinous arises [as it should] out of everyday life, which in turn, is grounded in marketscape. Awash in products, immersed in supermediated built environments, we have little direct experience of the natural world. This is increasingly true in the United States, where the view has it technology is the practice of rearranging the world so we do not have to experience it. Thus, we are all too often oblivious to the destructive consequences of our consumer behaviors. And yet, the recent provocative scholarship (Davis, 1998; Noble, 1997) that has challenged us to recognize the interpenetration of spirituality and technology that we have tried unsuccessfully to repress, might actually lead us home (Sherry, 2000). Not the luddites, but the ludites, shall inherit the earth; technopagans are the bellwethers our marketing futurists should monitor (Kozinets, 2000).

We need to nudge materiality (Sherry, 1995) from materiel back into matter, to bump soulful materialism (McNiff, 1995) back into nature. We need to "compromise" our world of goods a bit, and "complicate" our "spontaneous urge" (Soper, 1987, pp. 202-3) to immerse ourselves too unreflectively in the nexus of consumption. We need to construct and consume thoroughgoing cultural biographies and social histories of our materiel (du Gay *et al.*, 1997; Pendergrast, 1999; Ryan and Durning, 1997; Vanderbilt, 1998) to understand better the multistranded webs of significance in which stuff is

suspended (Geertz, 1973). But before we do any of this, we require a kernel of cosmology to enable us to make a leap of faith.

Such kernels abound in gnostic traditions east (Callicot and Ames, 1989) west (Breton and Largent, 1991; Fox, 1988) and all around the globe (Rockefeller and Elder, 1992). Hybridizing these kernels to engender a chiliastic consumerism or marketing mysticism that can encompass scientific and mythopoeic sensibilities is the order of the day. This enterprise will require a shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric worldview (Eckersley, 1992), and an ethos at once ecstatic and dispassionate. Rob Kozinets (personal communication) reminds me that the convergence of mindscape and cyberscape, the cultural emplacing of notional space that the hyperreal reconfigures as the "natural" and encourages to manifest as virtual community, may cause us to value wild places all the more, and to look for the "wild" in unlikely places (Friederici, 1999).

Rather than drawing from reformation movements such as socionomics (Naroll, 1983) and socioeconomics (Etzioni, 1988), which seek to hybridize the dismal and subversive sciences, and which are more infrastructural enterprises than I consider here, I suggest a subtler, softer starting point. Let's merge some foundational principles from general ecophilosophy (Bookchin, 1992; Clark, 1992; Skolimowski, 1992), environmental ethics (Rolston, 1988), deep ecology (Devall, 1988; Tobias, 1985), and even sociobiology (Wilson, 1992, 1998) without for a moment worrying about contending methodologies. Let's then, in millenarian style, sacralize these principles (Albanese, 1990; Daly and Cobb, 1989; Oelschlaeger, 1991) into a transpersonal ecology (Fox, 1990) congenial to some of our current thinking in marketing and consumer research.

Acknowledging the absurdly reductionist tack I am about to begin in the face of page constraints, and reminding the reader that I am not a theologian (nor do I play one on TV) by vocation or training, let me identify some key principles upon which an ecotheism might turn. Again, I am speaking normatively, and seeking to provoke a millenarian reaction. All life sentient and organic has intrinsic value, and follows an integral unfolding. "Resource" is a misnomer applied to the ecosphere; each component is rightly understood as a "source" (Rolston, 1988). Consumption of sources engenders ethical dilemmas and entails moral obligations, the consequences of which demand the enlightened consideration we have heretofore allowed ourselves to shirk.

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Everything is interconnected and endlessly recycled. Ecotheism implies an activist, consumerist engagement (Devall, 1988). Humans should survey, rescue, conserve, preserve and create biodiversity (Wilson, 1992). We should practice sustainable development, observe limits to growth, and seek appropriate scale. Quality of life should not be equated with ever increasing living standards. Humans have a cybernetic, field-like self. We should embrace organic wholeness and reject dualism. Ultimately, we seek identification and merger with the ecosphere on personal, ontological and cosmological bases (Fox, 1990). Such merger begins with a sense of residence in a local environment, and deepens with an indwelling, re-inhabitation of place. We must espouse a joyful, reverent, bioregional being-in-place. Finally, a periodic ritual and festive (re-)connection to the whole is needed for spiritual replenishment.

A principal challenge to an ecocentric millenarian movement is the anthropo-apical view of nature (Rolston, 1988). Culture complicates ecodynamics enormously. The emergence and refinement of volitional evolution (Wilson, 1998) is the most current case in point. However, like physicians who routinely incorporate their treatment of a disease into their diagnosis, or successful managers, who practice problem definition within their ongoing attempts to solve the problem complex, the human impact upon the ecosphere is emergent, complicating our attempts to understand and harmonize with it. The adaption of a stewardship role by humans with respect to the ecosphere is perhaps the most benign compromise currently available. At least, that's what I usually tell my students. As our search for consilience (Wilson, 1998) escalates, we must both sacralize material "reality" as it is empirically revealed, and seek transcendental "truth" in venues empiricism cannot address. This way stewardship prepares the fertile mindscape for some ultimately more egalitarian participation in the web of life, and holds out the promise of moral guidance as we employ technology to (re)create that very web.

Principles and pedagogy

In describing the ways in which the sacred and secular minds have contended over the centuries, and how materialist comprehension and metaphysical inquiry have accommodated to each other's advances, Robert Coles (1999) provides a platform for exploring chiliastic

consumerism. The transformation of secularity to an aspect of individualism and the sanctity of the secular mind's "introspective moral pause" (Coles, 1999, pp. 185, 189), should alert us to the sacral potential of reflective consciousness. Grasping awareness of natural networks and patterns, understanding human psychological and cultural articulation within these systems, and, perhaps pre-eminently, recognizing that any transpersonal ecology requires a conception of self distinctly different from the one invoked in instrumental and intrinsic value theories of ethics – an expansive sense of self that transcends the "egoic, biographical or personal" (Fox, 1990, p. 197) – are our portals to the sacred.

Adopting a consumerist perspective of new millennium religions, Cimino and Lattin (1998) identify a growing gap between spirituality and institutional religion. As denominational doctrine grows less relevant, experiential factors assume greater importance for seekers (a gnostic flavor). These authors envision the search for soul criss-crossing the sacred-secular divide, with creolized or syncretic belief systems proliferating, often in response to "churches" increasingly adept implementation of the marketing concept. Down-sized, decentralized denominations will inevitably search for common ground (Cimino and Lattin, 1998). Let me propose just one last time that this ecumenical common ground should be our literal common ground.

The ecotheism I envision is less an exercise in idolatry or misplaced concreteness (Daly and Cobb, 1989) than it is an invitation to the direct experience of immanence in the service of transcendence, of interconnection with and interdependence upon nature, of holistic and holographic involvement with the universe, of "transhuman magnificence" (Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 352; Bateson, 1991). This experience is primordial, prescient and perpetual. As revisionists in my home discipline call for a populist anthropology of integrative, humanitarian and messianic cast, we might well look for inspiration to the Buddhist, Hindu and animist traditions fueling the ideology of naturalism that undergirds many programs of sustainable development and environmental preservation (Karim, 1996).

From mindscape to landscape

Our response to an impending crisis should not be the mere aversion of a dangerous threat, but the seizing of an opportunity to

meet an (all too often) unarticulated need. Ecotheism can be a proactive prospect rather than a reactive resolution, especially if professors of the marketing discipline embody this mysticism and explore it in the classroom. Even better, by shedding the mantle of a sedentary clerisy, and becoming the kind of engaged, organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1973; Kozinets, 1999) our vocation virutally demands, marketing and consumer researchers can catalyze moral insurgency beyond the schoolyard.

Utopian discourse has always had a didactic mission. It invites us to reconsider our foundational assumptions, and offers models of alternative realities. It identifies the sources of our dissatisfaction and suggests remedies. It may harness our aspirations and direct them toward cultural change (Eckersley, 1992). If the sustainable society is our contemporary utopia, a politics of posterity must be rooted firmly in education (Garbarino, 1992). Professors of marketing are in a unique position to cultivate such politics. Even better, we can spark the desire for a spiritual grounding for those politics, by proselytizing in the service of our students' imagined progeny, one household at a time. Gary Snyder's observation (1990, p. 142) is poignant in this regard:

All too many people in power in governments and universities of the world seem to carry a prejudice against the natural world – and also against the past, against history. It seems Americans would live by a Chamber-of-Commerce Creationism that declares itself satisfied with a divinely presented Shopping Mall. The integrity and character of our own ancestors is dismissed with "I couldn't live like that" by people who barely know how to live at all.

Lest all this musing and provocation sound merely like the shamanic vibrations of superstrings plucked by a ham-fisted consumer cultural eroticist, let me imagine some convergence of research streams that might fuel the millenarian marketing I have described. I will present them in synergistic triads, minus their champions, again due to space constraints; the usual suspects will know who they are. The extended self, introspection and lived experience. Sacrality, magic, and ritual. Critical theory, liberatory postmodernism, and phenomenology of place. Gift giving, auratic objects and sacrifice. Given our field's firmly entrenched cult of personality, and our embarrassment of witches, we can probably even identify the prophets in our midst, who might be tapped to ignite marketing's millenarian movement. This option is also best explored in a later

paper. Let me emphasize one last time the inspirational nature of the insurrection I've imagined in this essay, and how we should begin the journey with ecopoetics (Scigaj, 1999) rather than with ecopragmatics (Farber, 1999). Before we begin an adventure in natural capitalism (Hawken *et al.*, 1999), we must grasp the metaphysics of inscape and instress (Cotter, 1972).

Marketing millenarianism must migrate from mindscape to landscape if it is to flourish. Ecotheistic pedagogy must ultimately be tied to place (Orr, 1992). Ecolytes are enlightened and exalted through lived experience in a local environment. Learning to reinhabit place in an appropriate way is the goal of this experience, and a practice the principles of which must be deferred for discussion to another paper. Much of the effort of the millenarian professor must extend beyond the heroic instigation of critical reflection (Catterall *et al.*, 2000) in classroom, to phenomenological field experiments in dwelling.

The irony – perhaps blasphemy – of recovering sacral principles from marketscapes to return them via mass-mediated mindscales to the natural world will be apparent to the reader. This is no less ironic than revealing these sacral principles at work in the lives of consumers to marketing managers in the first place. For marketing to meet the challenges of a new millennium in a way that encourages everyone's long-term well being, a touch of irony is certainly warranted. I think we can find an authentic alternative to distraction and destruction, but deliverance, like charity, begins at home. Let us hope a non-prophet finds the presence of mindscape to bring us all home.

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A taste of paradise

Guest Editors: Stephen Brown and Anthony Patterson

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