



The
Trivial,
the
Vain,
and the
Frivolous

Where consumer culture comes from.

By *Howard Bloom*

Of every hundred products launched each year, only twenty survive. Despite floods of marketing and advertising dollars, eighty bite the dust. Which hints that marketers do not control us—we control them.

Yet we're told that a cabal of insidious capitalists secretly rules our minds and, more specifically, manipulates our desires, twisting us with Machiavellian marketing campaigns that force us into a frenzy of false needs. The truth is very much the opposite: It's impossible for even the most bloated marketing budget to convince us to buy something that doesn't strike our fancy.

In the early 1970s, Elektra Records decided to prove for all time that a marketing campaign with a big enough budget, a campaign shaped by a sufficiently Napoleonic mind, could make any human with the talents of a housefly into a superstar. Elektra took an interesting but utterly anonymous singer named Jobriath, set aside a marketing budget of nearly \$22 million (in 2007 dollars), recorded an album of the most commercial music they could concoct, then spread Jobriath's name on everything from posters that went the full length of buses to subway ads, radio, and TV. The result? Jobriath went absolutely nowhere.

So Elektra was forced to return to the old music-industry approach, commonly summarized in the biz by the following unpleasant-sounding phrase: "throw the shit up against the wall and see what sticks." Translated from the vernacular, what does that motto mean? The music moguls should offer you and me a plethora of choices. Then they should let us dictate what we want.

HOWARD BLOOM is founder of the International Paleopsychology Project, executive editor of the New Paradigm book series, a founding board member of the Epic of Evolution Society, and author of *Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind From the Big Bang to the 21st Century*. From *The Genius of the Beast: A Radical Re-Vision of Capitalism* (Prometheus Books). ©2009

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What's the message of this and of many other big-budget marketing campaigns that have flopped? *You can't shove products down our throats and make us want them.* Not with standard advertising campaigns. Not with standard marketing plans. Not even with subliminal messages on film and video screens. When we want things, we want them for good reasons, even if we haven't a clue about what those reasons may be.

We'll strip away more of the wrappings that hide those reasons—the reasons we hunger for seemingly trivial things—as we continue to retell and re-perceive the history of Western civilization. But here's one fundamental key.

Our needs are always with us. They're built into the canyons of our brain. They're in organs like our nucleus accumbens, our ventral pallidum, our amygdala, and our ventral tegmentum. Those strange corners of the brain don't lust for the basics we commonly recite—food, shelter, and clothing—or even for basic dignity. Frankly, the dignity our brain assemblies crave is sometimes outrageous: It's not just basic but often way, way over the top. And that over-the-top-ness is built into our biology. What's more, our delight in new gadgets, new throwaways, and new novelties upgrades our species. Gadget lust and novelty hunger plug us into the group IQ. They plug us into engines of transcendence. They make us vigorous participants in the evolutionary search engine and the secular genesis machine.

The trivial uplifts us. So does the display of vanities. Think for a minute: Where did Johannes Gutenberg get the idea for his great invention, movable type? He was in the vanity and status-symbol business. He was a cutter and polisher of precious stones—useless trinkets with which the super-rich could show their stuff. He was also a goldsmith, making coins and, it appears, jewelry. From these arts he took the skills he used to create molds for individual letters of the alphabet. Gutenberg was also a maker of a brand-new high-tech gewgaw: the glass mirror, a mirror made by pouring glass into a frame, then pouring in lead to back the glass. Pouring lead (mixed with a bit of tin) would become part of the secret to casting the a's, the b's, and the c's of movable type.

What were Gutenberg's mirrors used for? Self-indulgence. Vanity. Right? Yes, but mirrors were also identity tools. In fact, they were one of the most astonishing identity extenders ever to appear in human history. Imagine what your sense of yourself would have been in the days before mirrors. You would have never seen yourself and would have had no idea of what you looked like. The invention of the mirror put the "image" into your "self-image." And into mine.

Then there was another frivolous bottom line to Gutenberg's work. Only the super-rich could afford books. In fact, the mega-

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wealthy flaunted their ability to own books by binding their volumes in leather adorned with gold, silver, and jewels. So the very products that Gutenberg was working to mass-produce—volumes of the Bible, psalters (books of psalms), Latin grammars and lexicons, and copies of a book by Aelius Donatus on the eight parts of speech—were status symbols, things you bought to show off your wealth and your refinement. Vanity, all is vanity.

Yet a noted German intellectual who was born soon after Gutenberg printed

his first tomes, Jakob Wimpfeling, called Gutenberg's invention of printing "almost a divine benefit to the world." And Wimpfeling was right. Gutenberg's invention was capitalism at its best. It was a material miracle. It was an act of secular genesis.

New symbols of high status such as the book sometimes play a powerful role in advancing something profoundly human—instant evolution, the technological upgrade of our species. The digital watch was introduced in June 1970 on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* as a status symbol, an expensive luxury with a gold case and ruby red numbers. The Hamilton Pulsar cost a whopping \$2,100—that's \$8,738.45 in 2007 dollars. The battle to produce cheaper, lighter, and more reliable digital watches led to the 1976 miniaturization of a nearly complete computer on a single chip from an obscure company called Intel. By the 1980s, the lust of the rich for this new electronic jewelry had driven prices down to the point where even a delivery boy could own a black plastic digital watch, a price so low that a watch fanatic of modest means like me could have ten digital time displays in just one room, my bedroom.

More important, the heart of a digital watch was a radically new slice of silicon. It was—bear with me while I repeat—the first complete electronic system on a single chip: in computer lingo, an SOC (System On a Chip). Why was this important? Digital-watch lust drove the development of the microprocessor and of the megascale integrated circuit that put millions of transistors and a host of disparate functions on just one chip. Digital-watch lust gave us the cell phone, the personal computer, and the laptop. And those devices utterly transformed our lives.

The trivial, the vain, and the frivolous can guide us to what could be but doesn't yet exist. The ancestors of the Aztecs and of the Mayans invented toys with wheels for their kids around 100 BCE. But it never occurred to them to use wheels to transport heavy loads. Aztec and Mayan kids were one step away from inventing the wheelbarrow and the wagon. There's a good chance they might have achieved this breakthrough if only the conquistadors hadn't cut their culture short in 1521.

"Frivolous wastes of time" can upgrade our species. "Pointless" status symbols can fuel the engine that transcends. ■