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Consuming Passions: Educating the Empty Self.

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ABSTRACT

The paper considers the connections between the environmental crisis and patterns of consumption in the Western, and Westernised, worlds. These patterns are named as 'malconsumption', a concept which is defined and then discussed in terms of its importance to the work of environmental educators. Malconsumption as a means of 'meaning-making' and of countering 'the empty self', and as a consequence of the activities of the advertising and other industries is explained. The paper closes with a summary of the orientation and activities associated with the practice of permaculture, and a proposition that a consideration of this practice in environmental education might contribute to a countering of the drive towards malconsumption.

A proliferation of scientific and philosophical analyses point to the existence of an environmental crisis, or crises. Many of these analyses implicate patterns of excessive and indiscriminate consumption amongst the economically affluent as a major cause of environmental malaise. However, references to what might be termed 'malconsumption' are surprisingly limited in most environmental education materials and curricula and, if environmental educators are addressing the issue, there is little discernible impact in terms of changed consumption patterns. In this paper we wish to foreground the silence about malconsumption in environmental education. Our main intention is to suggest that the apparent inadequacy of environmental education strategies for dealing with malconsumption can be addressed by a recognition that current consumption patterns are linked to historical trends in the psychological configuration of the self. In our view, an exploration of the ways in which consumption has become a major form of meaning-making for the provision of satisfaction in affluent societies, generates important implications for environmental education. We propose that the pratice of permaculture can open up environmental education opportunities to attend to these implications.

Consumption and the environmental crisis

It is perhaps never superfluous to remind ourselves of the gravity of the complex interplay of socio-ecological risks and issues which have become known as the environmental crisis. Among the more global environmental dilemmas are climate change, ozone layer depletion, degradation of agricultural land and decline in biodiversity. These, in turn impact, often disproportionately, on the health, livelihoods and quality of life of people. So serious is the situation that 1500 leading scientists, including 102 Nobel Prize winners, warned (Union of Concerned Scientists 1992) that:

> *Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know.....We the undersigned, senior members of the world's scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. A great change in our stewardship of the earth and all life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.*

'the current world economic system.....is fuelled by the seemingly ever-increasing consumption of commodities'

The emergence of environmental problems can be explained in terms of how people's daily actions are shaped by certain ideals about life and living. These actions and ideals have co-developed with and within the current world economic system. This system is fuelled by the seemingly ever increasing consumption of commodities which requires increasing levels of extraction from and transformation of the natural world into goods. This consumption of commodities is not evenly spread around the globe and Ransom (1992) has argued that:

> *.....the threat to the environment comes from what we consume in the North. It does not matter which measure you take.....the degradation of the Earth and the threat of global warming comes from the wealthy minority who live largely in the North.*

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'an unequivocal link between..... overconsumption in the North, and global inequalities and ecological damage'

While it is true that the wealthy minority to which Ransom refers live mainly in 'developed' or industrialised contexts, the distinction between the 'developed' countries of the 'North' and 'developing' countries of the 'South' is not only problematic but is increasingly blurred. The middle classes and their associated resource use are rapidly expanding in countries like India and China—and multinational industries more and more target 'developing' countries to stimulate the consumption of goods. Affluent minorities, such as government officials, drug lords, development agents, also occur in the South, but it is their links to the world economic system which often keep the countries within which they reside in a debt-ridden and 'developing' situation vis a vis the North (see Rahnema 1997). Second, there can be little doubt that population pressure and resource scarcity in the South have detrimental effects on physical environments. However, quantitative analyses of the resource flow from the 'developing'—or 'underdeveloped'—to the 'developed' world have established an unequivocal link between the wealth of the North and the poverty of the South, in turn intertwined with population growth, and hence between overconsumption in the North, and global inequalities and ecological damage (see Mies & Shiva 1993, George 1997, Ryan & Durning 1997).

Consumption cannot be construed as the sole or even main cause of the environmental crisis; its causes are multi-faceted, interrelated and complex. However, there is ample evidence that the consumption patterns prevalent in the industrialised world and rapidly spreading across the globe have major ramifications on depletion of natural resources, pollution of ecological life support systems and issues of social justice (Rahnema, 1997). In addition, as should become clear below, 'malconsumption' can be related to large-scale historical shifts which are entangled in the complexity of socio-ecological malaise. We intend to illustrate the deep embeddedness of this phenomenon in social trends and psychological configurations of self in Western culture. To do so, we need to elucidate the concept of malconsumption.

Malconsumption

To describe the extraordinary accumulation of material goods that has such marked consequences for ecological sustainability and social equity, Hillcoat, in a forthcoming PhD thesis, has introduced the term 'malconsumption'. The term's deliberate function is to highlight the fact that humans must consume to stay alive and to make it clear that not all consumption is bad. We need air, water, food and shelter to sustain life processes. There are biological necessities that are present regardless of the form of society. Thus, malconsumption should not be read as a condemnation of consumption *per se*. But when consumption becomes a seemingly insatiable purchasing of consumables, as indicated in sources referred to above, a healthy process converts into an 'unhealthy' one.

'malconsumption.....does not recognise or pay heed to the ecological and social significance of the act of consumption'

Rather than defining malconsumption in terms of a definitive list of consumer goods which may be claimed as representative of it, Hillcoat's work aims to identify malconsumption as a set of behaviours in which the ecological and social ramifications of the act of consumption are not considered and/or acted upon. In other words, *malconsumption is indicative of a way of life that does not recognise or pay heed to the ecological and social significance of the act of consumption*. Thus, the use of the term 'malconsumption' highlights a lack of awareness of and/or consideration for the social and ecological consequences that result from both the volume of consumer goods utilised and the ways in which the goods have been produced and made available to consumers. Fostering this escalating process of malconsumption is the advertising industry which has, in recent years, started to target ever younger audiences (see the video *Affluenza*, distributed by Bullfrog Films - www:pbs.oregan/affluenza). Referred to at a marketing conference covered in the video as "the cash crop to be harvested", children are targeted as not only consumers of the future, to be 'branded' with the image of a particular product name as early as possible, but also as a market with a strong emotional sway over those family members who do have purchasing power.

This indicates a role for environmental education, as it has been described by UNESCO-UNEP (1978) in terms of the development of environmental awareness, knowledge, consideration—attitudes and values—and skills, and participation in decision-making , all of which, in the light of the context sketched above, clearly includes assisting people to make informed decisions about the nature, extent and means of their acts of consumption. To what extent, then, do environmental educators engage the issue of malconsumption? We believe that we, and our environmental education colleagues, do so inadequately. Perhaps we need no further proof than to ask ourselves how effectively and consistently we, as environmental educators, make ecologically sustainable choices when we consume. Why is it so difficult to change our consumption patterns? Before we explore this question, we will explain our belief that many contemporary environmental education activities engage inadequately with the issue of malconsumption.

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Environmental education and malconsumption

Given the critical link between unsustainable consumption and global environmental issues one would assume that environmental education processes would engage malconsumption as a pivotal issue. While this paper is not a review of international environmental education curricula or programs, our experience and reports from colleagues suggest that while many environmental education programs mention consumption as an issue, many also fail to address it in any significant depth.

'environmental education programs are increasingly in danger of actively supporting malconsumption'

Furthermore, it would appear that environmental education programs are increasingly in danger of actively supporting malconsumption. Recently the North American Association of Environmental Education (NAAEE) collaborated with NIKE, a company producing sports and 'lifestyle' shoes—ones which represent or construct a certain lifestyle for the wearer and their contemporaries, rather than merely protecting their feet—using underpaid labour in Asia (Conner & Atkinson 1996) to produce "an environmental education program designed to engage 5th and 6th grade students in exploring how businesses and consumers can share responsibility" (NAAEE, 1998). It is claimed that the programme "empowers students with the tools they need to put the future health of their planet into their own hands" This includes participating in NIKE's recycling programme in which second-hand shoes are recycled to put coverings on neighbourhood recreation areas. The point of noting this not unique alliance between environmental education and big business is the way in which malconsumption seems to be supported quite overtly in the program. The article is silent about the need to reduce, rather than only recycle, consumer goods, or to question the way in which the goods are produced.

This is also the case, if perhaps more covertly, in many other environmental education programs sponsored by industries, for example where government sponsorship of environmental education programs is limited, the operations of which are not questioned in the programs themselves. As in our actual consumption patterns, environmental educators are in an intricate bind with industry, big business and economies in general.

Environmental education programs which do address consumption include those which emphasise the despoilative impacts of humankind on a presumed pristine nature. Nature unaffected by humans is at times romanticised to the extent that virtually all consumption comes to be seen as problematic. When such environmental education processes focus exclusively on providing young people with experiences of 'pristine' environments they can be very successful at fostering amongst the learners what O'Donoghue (1994) described as 'earth-love', a commitment to a romantic notion of the planet. They may unfortunately leave young people with few alternatives for living their lives in the face of the vast gap between what is —the global economic system and our compulsions to consume—and the ideal of people living 'in harmony with Nature'.

A notable exception to the above, and there are bound to be others, is the curriculum package *What We Consume* which is based on the socially critical approach to environmental education supported by series coordinator John Huckle (1988). Although advocates of socially critical environmental education do encourage realist analyses of the social structures and ideologies embedded in environmental issues there are a number of problems with this orientation. First, the approach advocates that learners be involved in critical enquiry and action to address environmental issues as they encounter them, and that they take a strong role in identifying these issues themselves. However, learners may not feel comfortable about asking critical questions about issues, or even think to do so. In a case study of an instance of democratic environmental health education Ferreira (1996) noted that pupils encouraged by their teacher to think critically about the role of television in health focussed on the time spent watching TV—as opposed to being outdoors, rather than on the content of advertisements or the role of advertising in children's television. In instances such as these learners' deeply entrenched psychological orientations may not give rise to processes of social critique. Second, even if educational processes succeed in conscientising participants to critical issues, the assumption that we will act differently once we recognise the structural-ideological roots of our behaviour presupposes that we act on the basis of a rational self. This assumption is strongly questioned by experience and by critics of critical pedagogy (see, for example, Bowers 1993).

'explor[ing]the links between malconsumption and personal meaning-making patterns'

In the last part of the paper we return to the treatment given to issues around consumption within contemporary environmental education, and to how this process can be blind to what are core and sustaining features of excessive consumption. Our next step is to explore the links between malconsumption and personal meaning-making patterns, an exploration which we believe addresses some of the limitations of a socially critical perspective about environmental issues. We propose that environmental education processes should also involve addressing: the psychological dimensions of malconsumption; the ways in which these dimensions have been socially shaped over

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time; and the ways in which they maintain, as entrenched processes of meaning-making, the social patterns and the economic system which environmental education intends to address. Such a consideration, we believe, might enable a deepening of the manner in which educators attend to malconsumption in environmental education processes.

Making meaning though malconsumption—the 'empty self'

We now return to the question of why consumption is so entrenched in social patterns and so alluring to the contemporary self. One dimension is the fact that the consumption of goods, services and 'signs' drives the world economic system, and malconsumption is thus sustained by the machinery which protects and develops that system, such as advertising in the mass media. This is not the dimension focussed on here, although it cannot be separated from the analysis which follows. Our focus is on the psychological configuration of the self, in which the purchasing of commodities has become a major form of meaning-making satisfaction for individuals living in Western, and Westernising, contexts.

'malconsumption as a means of fulfilment is the product of specific long-term trends in the shaping of the self'

Many theorists have addressed the social shaping of the self (see, for example, Elias 1978 and Giddens 1991). Cushman (1995), in an account of different configurations of self manifesting throughout the history of Western civilisation, has suggested that "self is always a product of a specific cultural frame of reference, configured out of moral understandings and local politics". With this in mind, our proposition is that malconsumption as a means of fulfilment is the product of specific long-term trends in the shaping of the self. Its rise has been a long-term, multi-faceted process involving the interplay of psychological, economic, cultural and political factors. Psychological configurations vary across cultures, and the self is not necessarily a coherent, stable entity (Flax, 1990). But in every epoch certain configurations of self developed a prevalence, and the emergence of the 'consumer society' has seen the manifestation of a configuration of self that is both expressive of and contributive to that society.

Of particular interest here is this crucial transformation in the configuration of the self which took place in the 19th century and set the conditions for the emergence of the consumer society. The dominant configuration of self in Western societies in the middle of the 19th century was based on Protestant ethics of hard work, thriftiness and moral discipline. Thus, puritans believed that "methodical life-planning, self-control and self-denial were the best defences against the ethical inconsistency which offended God and so jeopardised the achievement of their ultimate end—salvation" (Jary & Jary 1991). This configuration of the self changed dramatically towards the end of that century, as the role of religion in providing a meaningful sense to reality declined and an increasingly corporate economy and technological change created the conditions necessary for the emergence of a 'therapeutic ethos'. Concomitantly people's involvements with the natural world became less direct. Lears (1983) has maintained that:

> *[t]echnological change isolated the urban bourgeoisie from the hardness of life on the land; an interdependent and increasingly corporate economy circumscribed autonomous will and choice; a softening Protestant theology undermined commitments and blurred ethical distinctions.*

It is argued that to compensate for this emerging sense of unreality and alienation there developed a strong urge for experiences that intensified reality (Cushman 1995, Lears 1983). Within these circumstances a so-called 'therapeutic ethos' took hold. With its doctrine of self-realisation, which offered an intense inner life of endless personal growth, thus presenting an ultimate purpose for human existence, the therapeutic ethos offered "bracing relief from the stifling sense of unreality" (Lears 1983). , Lears has suggested that this ethos was necessary for the acceptance of the capitalist rationalisation of existence that started to exert systematic control over Western societies.

'selfhood was increasingly managed through surface appearances'

Reconfiguration of the self through the therapeutic ethos externalised the way the moral codes of the self were ordered. Instead of the internalised moral code of the puritan self, the self in the dominion of the therapeutic ethos took its cues from an externalised moral code. Thus, selfhood was increasingly managed through surface appearances designed to fulfil the expectations of others. Lears (1983) continued:

> *The therapeutic ethos implied not only that one ought to pursue health single-mindedly but also that one ought to be continuously exuding personal magnetism and the promise of ever more radiant, wholesome living. The coerciveness of the 'ought' came less often from an internalised moral code and more often from the expectations of others; but the coerciveness was still there, wedded to ideals like 'growth' and 'spontaneity' that proved vague and elusive.*

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'the 'healing' of the self.....became equated with the purchase of consumer goods'

In this century the development of a sophisticated advertising industry has further entrenched the therapeutic ethos. Lears (1994) has articulated a synergistic link between advertising and the therapeutic ethos, in which advertisers manage the therapeutic ethos to create an impression that well being and opportunities for self-realisation would be impeded if certain products were not purchased. For example, it is suggested that we can realise our sexual allure and social status and even open up new relationships with the environment by purchasing a certain model car. Cushman (1995) suggested that the 'healing' of the self through self realisation became equated with the purchase of consumer goods. Similar phenomena are observed in a growing range of societies and in less affluent communities. Among Aboriginal peoples in several countries abuse of alcohol and other drugs have been linked to a loss of meaning associated with cultural alienation. In rural South Africa a Zulu family use an income from eco-tourism to purchase 'white goods' despite the fact that their hut is not electrified (personal observation, Janse van Rensburg).

Thus, by the 1920s Americans began to "base their identity and self-esteem on what they bought" (Brandt 1995). At this time the growing link between personal meaning and purchasing of consumer goods was also aided, according to Lasch (1984), by a concerted effort to re-educate Americans to refrain from producing their own goods and instead to rely on 'the market'. People were encouraged to buy vegetables instead of growing them, and store-bought was advocated as better than 'home-made'. These efforts were at first mainly significant in the upper classes. In the aftermath of World War II, however, consumerism became a mass phenomenon in the United States and other industrialised countries. The fervour of that period is reflected in this statement by marketing consultant Lebow in the *Journal of Retailing*—as quoted by Christensen (1991):

> *Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption a way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction in consumption ... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-growing rate.*

It is in this atmosphere that a new configuration of the self, with its roots in the dramatic transformations in Western society and selfhood of the previous one hundred years, developed ascendancy. This configuration of the self, which Cushman (1995) called the 'empty self', is now prevalent in the middle—or consumer—classes of the Western, and Westernised, worlds. While we do see the empty self as a dominant feature of such societies, we do not propose it as an all-explaining concept, or a homogenous quality across and within these societies. Its manifestation may vary according to the interplay of political, cultural, economic and environmental factors.

Our emphasis here is on situating the empty self in its cultural context, and we will refrain from discussing its specific psychological features. Suffice to say that the empty self can be equated with a sense of a deep inner void that seemingly cannot be filled, and an accompanying elusiveness of meaning and purpose in life. It is in the contemporary self's need to fill this inner void in its daily life that we, along with Cushman (1995) and others, see a compelling link to malconsumption. He argued that an empty self was crucial to the maintenance of an economy based on an apparently ever-escalating consumption; "a sense of meaninglessness and absence feeds these businesses". The endless cycle of aggressive acquisition of consumer goods and experiences spins the treadmill which drives the economy, and it is fuelled by advertising which provides a 'lifestyle solution' to the empty self (see Cushman 1995), typified by the, usually unstated, message 'Wear our shoes and you, too, will have meaningful relationships with your peers'.

Implications for environmental education processes

If there is such a deep and pervasive historically constructed core to consumption practices, how best can environmental educators address the issue of malconsumption? We argued earlier that many environmental education curricula and programs either support malconsumption, ignore it, treat it in insufficient depth, romanticise the more-than-human (Weston 1994) in a disempowering way, or fail to address the deeply entrenched meaning-making role of consumption.

'what we perceive as worthwhile.....is socially constructed'

Given the link between the empty self and advertising, critical media education comes to mind as one pathway towards developing among learners a properly informed and critical sense of the way in which advertising maintains and exploits a psychological configuration in order to foster malconsumption. Media education can provide a space, first, for recognising that our meaning and meanin-making—what we perceive as worthwhile and as the best ways to satisfy our ideals—are socially constructed and, second, for exploring ways in which this is engineered. With this understanding comes an opening up of possibilities for alternative ideals and alternative ways of satisfying them. However, critical media education may be limited by the same blind spots as socially critical

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environmental education and, for example, remain at a rhetorical level. Here we use the term 'blind spots' in the same way as Wagner (1992)—to refer to those areas about which we never ask questions because we are ideologically unaware of them.

Another site for such learning, and an opportunity for environmental education processes involving powerful engagements with the notion of malconsumption which we wish now to sketch in some detail, is the activities and orientation associated with the practice of permaculture.

Permaculture and malconsumption

'participants provide for many of their basic needs in an ecologically sensitive manner'

Permaculture is an activity through which participants provide for many of their basic needs in an ecologically sensitive manner; for a review of orientation and processes see Mollison & Slay (1994). Its aim is the design of community—and home—systems that work with and like the natural world, as a result of which resources are used effectively and waste is minimised. The potential of such processes for engaging the issue of malconsumption lies in the following:

1. Permaculture presents practical alternatives to those ways of living and economic structures which socially critical environmental education encourages participants to critique, at times in an abstract, intellectualised manner without clear courses of action. By encouraging self-reliance through home production it keeps open possibilities for breaking consumer dependency on markets in the social consciousness, even though complete self-reliance is extremely hard to achieve. Through involvement in permaculture participants can practically address the dependency of the empty self upon contemporary capitalist economic arrangements for the staples of life.
2. Permaculture does not romance nature; it recognises the need to consume and thus sustain ourselves through nature. As one struggles to keep pests from one's own food, romantic notions of nature are usually replaced by a more realistic, complex and practical understanding of interrelationships. Thus the problem of living sustainably is engaged with directly, rather than remaining an issue to analyse or agonise over.
3. Given the difficulties of individual self-reliance, permaculture networks encourage sustainability through cooperation with others. Such networks, with a focus on shared actions, are often seen as very effective motors for social change; like study circles they can be effective community education forums and they address the despondency and despair which individuals with an environmental commitment often experience.
4. By engaging participants on a sustained basis in working with the soil, elements and organisms permaculture provides opportunities for the immersion of the empty self, historically detached from the land—in what Weston (1994) describes as the 'more-than-human'—even within otherwise denuded urban settings. The opportunity for physical engagement with the environment as 'significant other' may create spaces, in a realm other than the rational, for the redirecting of meaning-making processes. It can do so in ways which neither romanticise the more-than-human, nor assume change as the response of a rational self to an intellectual critique of our circumstances.

The potential of permaculture is however ambiguous. As a traditionally rather low-key, small-scale activity, it appears rather insignificant compared to the extent and deep roots of malconsumption and the economic machinery which maintains it. While it aims to help participants jump off the treadmill of malconsumption, it also has the potential to comply with and reinforce such consumption, for example in the emergence of permaculture consumer goods such as. mugs and t-shirts. Still, even ambiguous processes may keep ajar the openings in which networks of individuals can seek alternative meaning-making within and against the trends shaping current crises of self and environment.

Conclusion

We have provided a brief and therefore limited review of the emergence of a psychological configuration which has come to be prevalent in Western and Westernised societies and which has been termed 'the empty self' to denote a sense of alienation and evasive meaning in these societies. We have referred to some analyses in the literature in order to link the empty self and the therapeutic ethos, with which it co-evolved, to the excessive and highly symbolised consumption behaviours which are characteristic of contemporary Western and Westernised societies. Malconsumption can, in turn, be implicated very strongly in ecological degradation and in social inequities between rich and poor which constitute the environmental crisis. It is fuelled in turn by an advertising industry which maintains and exploits the therapeutic ethos of the empty self.

'many curricula, materials and programs either avoid the issue or silently support malconsumption'

These factors would imply that environmental education processes would strongly engage the issue of

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malconsumption; yet, we argued, many curricula, materials and programs either avoid the issue or silently support malconsumption. Alternatively, they may address the issue through advocating harmony with earth, or in structural/ideology critique, but do so blind to the powerful role of psychological meaning-making processes in malconsumption. This paper is intended to encourage the environmental education community to take cognisance of the role of 'the empty self' in unsustainable consumption patterns, and to engage it in ways which seem appropriate to them. We have suggested that permaculture is one activity with strong possibilities for opening up environmental education processes that will engage directly and productively with the issue of malconsumption.

'as dubious as.....educational materials which..... promote big business'

Readers should not interpret this contribution as a marketing of permaculture as the latest commodified technique in the supermarket of environmental education 'innovations'. We are aware of the paradoxical potentialities of the practice. Accordingly, we also recognise that the 'closing down' of what are, at best, open-ended environmental educational processes of engaged exploration, critique and action—through attachment to either romanticised notions of harmony, or one-dimensional structural critique, or processes turned into techniques—could be as dubious as the uncritical use of educational materials which often emerge from and promote big business.

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