



Cheap Thrills

Noemie Emery

The love of the bargain—the good deal—the something, if not for nothing, for less than its value—is hardwired into the human (especially the female) persona as a strong and definitive trait. Doubtless it stems from our primitive days, in which hunting and gathering took time and effort, and finding a rich source of food without much of either was a boost to survival and pride. Then, we exchanged calories for food, pelts, and shelter; now we exchange cash (which tends to buy calories); but the thrill of the buy remains permanent. This leads in turn to obsessions with value: What is it? Who sets it? And what does it mean?

In cultures like ours, it veers into morals, moving into questions of wants against needs. How much should we spend on ourselves and on others? What is the line between pleasure and overindulgence? Can we enjoy life without being greedy? What do we “deserve”?

Small wonder that shopping, like food, is prey to strange aberrations:

scrimping and splurging, bingeing and purging, grim self-denial and credit-card debt. Small wonder too that consumerism has spawned a spending-industrial complex to explain and exploit it: endless natterings by pseudo-psychiatrists, consumer “studies” in the schools that employ them, and streams of books on consumer anxiety. One such book is *Shoptimism* by Lee Eisenberg, a

good-natured view from both sides of the counter. By contrast, Ellen Ruppel Shell’s *Cheap* ventures an attack on bargain stores and those who shop in them.

Eisenberg, a buyer who once was a seller (vice president of Lands’ End, a mid-

range marketer of sportswear that sells online and via catalogues), takes a forgiving view of the shopping transaction, in which the random whims of the buyer and the wiles of the seller connect. “A vast number of our buys are simply the result of random collision and snap decision making,” he tells us. “Those seersucker cargoes you thought were spiffy?

Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep On Buying No Matter What

By Lee Eisenberg

Free Press ~ 2009 ~ 334 pp.

\$26 (cloth)

Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture

By Ellen Ruppel Shell

Penguin ~ 2009 ~ 296 pp.

\$25.95 (cloth)

What were you *thinking*? Those salt and pepper shakers shaped like light bulbs? They were cute, they made you smile, but now they're gathering dust on the windowsill beside your cactus collection, which also seemed cute at the time." Shoppers, he says, come in two basic versions: the Romantics, or the "easy sells," who shop to feel good and can be easily swayed by impulse and gimmicks; and the Classics, who are centered on value, and whom the arts of the schemers do little to move. The Classics tend to be moored in their minds to the "anchor"—the price they have fixed in their heads as "appropriate"—beyond which they are rarely budged. Retailers use a number of strategies to try to nudge the Classics in the spending direction, like juxtaposing big- and mid-ticket items to do end-runs around the Classics' defenses. "What's a few hundred dineros for a sweater at Ralph Lauren's stately emporium when Ralph is displaying a \$14,000 alligator 'Ricky' bag just a few feet away from that sweater?" Eisenberg asks us. "A pair of sunglasses costing \$350? Peanuts—if you're anchored to what a *dress* costs at Chanel." At Lands' End, the marketers created displays in the catalogue designed to point buyers towards the middle-priced item (known as the "hero") by posing it larger and placing it between the stripped-down and the higher-priced versions. Restaurateurs routinely do something quite similar, leading their menus with obscenely

priced offerings—not to get people to buy *them*, but to order the next item down. Having passed on the \$100 bottle of wine, they feel prudent enough to order the \$40. In fact, the first bottle gave them permission. They've already "saved" \$60, at least in their fantasies. Now they can splurge.

How sinister is this? In Eisenberg's eyes, not very. He sees the market as a huge tug-of-war in which the wills and interests of millions of discrete buyers and sellers push at each other until all arrive at a price they consider "appropriate," pitting the cost of the piece against what the buyer expects to get from it in terms of use, durability, status satisfaction, and indefinable psychic appeal.

Shell, on the other hand, sees a much darker story: she isn't angry because people sometimes get tricked into buying things that cost too much money: she's incensed because things are too cheap. Claiming that the pursuit of low price can be a bad bargain, she points to her past as a recovering cheapskate, a consumer of horsemeat (sorry for that, all you *Seabiscuit* lovers), a devotee of sale bins at the local emporia, and the eventual owner of a stunning collection of tchotchkes and schmattes too ugly, shoddy, or ill-fitting to wear or to use much, but much too cheap not to buy. She makes a solid case that low price without a proper assessment of value is folly, and that

wasting hours and gallons of gas on a trip to a mall in search of a mark-down can in the end cost you more than it saves. Her warnings against fanatical cheapness (the anorexia of the consumer persuasion) are on target, and ought to be heeded. On the other hand, her critiques of the system seem somewhat misguided, filled with contradictions that are never resolved.

Shell—whose previous book, *The Hungry Gene*, discussed corporate conspiracy as a contributing cause of obesity—whacks Walmart, Costco, Target, IKEA, and the supermarket/agrarian industrial complex for numerous failings, some of which are even real. She says they make disposable goods that don't last, and get tossed into landfills; that their service is awful, if not nonexistent; that their employees are not paid well; that the people who make goods (in Third World countries) are paid even less well; and that food raised or grown for mass production isn't quite as nutritious or tasty as that grown or raised on small farms. All true, which is more than one can say for her other charges, that they (and we) have devalued the culture, corrupted our souls, poisoned the country, eroded the middle ground between cheap and much too expensive in consumer selection, caused a "radical departure in American culture," and even brought on the current recession and the crash that preceded it in the fall of 2008.

But the crash was caused by massive debt on all levels of spending, and the mistaken attempts of politicians to extend the joys of home ownership to those who could not afford it. There *is* a huge middle ground—at Lands' End, for example—and you can buy shoes, shirts, or jackets for \$20, \$200, \$2,000, or any price in between.

Shell blasts IKEA because it designs for easy construction, cheap production, portability, and easy disposal, which is just what Americans crave. Americans have always been transient, restless, eager to seek out the next new invention, driven to break with the past. They were like this in 1830, when Alexis de Tocqueville paid them a visit, and they are like this today. "In the United States," Tocqueville wrote in his masterpiece, "a man carefully builds a dwelling in which to pass his declining years, and he sells it while the roof is being laid; he plants a garden and he rents it out just as he was going to taste its fruits; he clears a field and he leaves to others the task of harvesting its crop. He embraces a profession and quits it. He settles in a place from which he departs soon after so as to take his changing desires elsewhere." Tocqueville asked a shipbuilder why he used flimsy material, and was told ships did not have to last long, as better ways to build them would be found soon enough. He also noted that Americans were eager to acquire new things. They were frugal only

when they were forced to be so—before industrialization, when goods took time to make and were rare and expensive, or during depressions, when money was scarce.

As Shell herself notes, this country has had three major boom times when the middle class made huge leaps ahead in prosperity—in the 1920s, the post-World War II boom of the 40s and 50s, and the boom of the 80s and 90s. Not coincidentally, each came in on the crest of the trends Shell finds so depressing—in the 1920s, supermarkets and Woolworths; in the 50s, discount stores like Korvettes and suburban tract houses in Levittown; in the 80s, the rise of the box stores and malls. In other words, in the last century mass prosperity in terms of material goods had always gone along with mass production and marketing, the end or curtailment of independent small businesses, of full-service shopping, of more durable goods. In fact, the alignment of these trends with increased mass prosperity has been so consistent that it is logical to deduce that these things were the cause or the result of that prosperity, and that without them, it might have never occurred.

Clearly, Shell wants to see a system emerge where people without much money have access to attractive and durable goods, where the people who make them are well-paid and cared for, and where the stores that stock them are staffed with

well-trained and well-recompensed help. We can all join her in that hope. The problem is that neither she nor anyone can point to a culture in which this has happened, nor come up with realistic suggestions to bring it about. You can cut production and sales costs of goods enough to bring a wide range of affordable “good enough” items to a mass audience, or you can keep costs up, forcing people to scrimp to buy simple necessities. Overly fastidious middle-class people like Shell may decide for themselves to buy fewer and better-made articles, but the truly strapped do not have this option. And a great many other middle-class people may decide, when it comes to some items, that “good enough” may be all that they need.

Money saved at Walmart or Target is freed up to flow in other directions it might otherwise have never gone. Cheaper t-shirts and socks can go to save up for a really nice outfit. The cheaper couch or the build-it-yourself bookcase can go into food or wine, to vacations or hobbies, to books, art, or music, or to tickets to ball games or plays. Cheaper things bought over years can facilitate fees for children’s activities, or enable the taking of a less well-paying job than would otherwise be possible. In a world run by Shell, all but the rich would have many fewer choices. And the poor might have nothing at all.

The fact that Walmart and Target bring attractive design within reach

of those short of money seems to annoy Shell all the more. “‘Design’ has become a stand-in for quality,” she laments, as if low-cost things *ought* to be hideous. And perhaps they should, as that would empower class warfare: “Mass-market consumption offers the façade of social equality without forcing society to go through the hard work of redistributing wealth,” as she says. (Someone should tell her they tried this in Russia.) And there’s this treasure of terrible writing, not to mention clueless self-parody: “Low prices lead consumers to think they can get what they want without necessarily giving them what they want—or need.” Shell rails at IKEA and others for making “fashionable, desirable, and even lovable” products that are sadly lacking in craftsmanship. But most of their customers can’t afford handmade and high-quality items, and without stores like IKEA would have to choose between flimsy products that are ugly to look at or nothing at all. Nothing at all seems just fine with Shell, who evidently harks

back to the good old days, before the Depression, IKEA, and Costco, when the poor knew their place.

“Back then,” writes Charlotte Allen, in a *Los Angeles Times* review of Shell’s opus, “people who couldn’t afford ‘quality’ furniture slept on mattresses on the floor and hammered together makeshift tables out of orange crates. They went barefoot during the summer and sewed their children’s clothes out of (non-organic) flour sacks. That was what ‘cheap’ meant then—not today’s plethora of affordable goods.”

That’s okay with Shell, as it didn’t fill landfills. Until the day of Shell’s revolution, when we all can buy Chippendale, mind your wits, but go shopping. Go to Chanel or to Target, and look for the markdown. And get the best deal that you can.

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