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## OBSERVER

### Attention, Shoppers: Your Dreams in Aisle 3

By SHARON ZUKIN

For a long time, I didn't realize that I was born to shop. I am not amused when I enter my local Kmart during the holiday season and come face to face with a pair of life-size, gyrating mannequins in red-velvet suits -- Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus -- just past the security sensors. Neither am I cheered by the slogan on the window of a nearby Virgin Mega-store: "Merry Savings to You!" But since I have published a book about the culture of shopping in America, I take those spurs to buy things more seriously than does the average shopper.

Ten years ago, it hit me that shopping had become a highly visible part of the landscape and an important part of my life. At first I thought that just reflected personal changes. After my daughter was born, in 1990, I bought enough disposable diapers and plastic playthings to support the expansion of Toys "R" Us around the world. Then I began to notice that more newspapers and magazines were publishing articles about what to buy, and that more, and bigger, stores were springing up around me. When Kmart opened a discount superstore in my neighborhood -- a unique event in lower Manhattan -- my neighbors and I shopped there for six-packs of Bounty paper towels.

This wasn't happening just in store-rich New York City. All around the country, Americans were shopping more than ever before -- and talking more about it.

By 1987, the United States had more shopping malls than high schools. Financial companies issued more than one billion credit cards. Mail-order merchants sent out five billion catalogs a year. Then, in the mid-'90s, the Internet brought Amazon.com, eBay, and pop-up advertisements into our homes and offices. Now we can shop anywhere, anytime, even if we don't have much money.

Most social critics blame us for buying stuff we don't need. "Affluenza": We have more money, so we spend it. "Luxury fever": We want the good things that others have. "Greed": We have an urge to splurge. As baby boomers, we were never taught self-control.

But the supply side should come in for blame as well. Since the 1970s, the amount of retail space per person has quadrupled, and America has had too many stores chasing too few sales. Wal-Mart -- the discount store whose policies toward its work force recall Scrooge McDuck's -- has grown to be the largest private employer on the planet. Nor is it that Americans have an irrational desire to buy things.

These days, few of us bake our own bread, sew our own clothes, or know how to build a car. We depend on shopping to buy what we need for survival.

Each time we shop, however, we are surrounded by visions of abundance. We think not only of what we need, but also of what we could have. The more we see, the more we want to see, because whether entering a store or accessing a retail Web site, we invest time, money, and emotion in the means of our seduction.

Even if we don't make a purchase, the social space of stores is a material image of our dreams. Low prices? Wal-Mart, where men and women of all income levels shop together, offers us a vision of democracy. Brand names? Sony and Band-Aids represent our means to a better life. Designer labels? The Armani suit or Miss Sixty jeans will win us the job or a social partner.

The seduction of shopping is not about buying goods. It's about dreaming of a perfect society and a perfect self. As Walter Benjamin knew when he wrote about the Paris Arcades, shopping encourages us to get lost in daydreams while giving us a way to pursue our dreams rationally. We're looking for truth with a capital T, beauty *and* economic value. In a society where we no longer have contact with nature or beauty in our daily lives, shopping is one of the few ways we have left to create a sense of ultimate value.

Yet shopping also often plunges us into conflict. We can't find what we want. What we find is too expensive. And it doesn't fit.

Take Cindy, who shopped for a year to find "the perfect pair of leather pants." When she begins to tell me her story, I can't help thinking she's a narcissist. Cindy sees herself as a practical shopper. She firmly believes that she will find what she wants: "a *classic* pair of leather pants." Cindy has a good job, but she doesn't want to spend too much money. She wants good quality, but her search is complicated because, like many women, she has a size problem. Most women tell me they can't find the size they need because their hips, or thighs, or arms are out of proportion to the rest of their body. In Cindy's case, her size is too small for most stores to carry -- she's a size 2 petite.

Cindy is not out of sync with the zeitgeist. But she *is* persuaded by the whole infrastructure of consumer society -- stores, advertisements, magazines -- that she will find what she wants. So she keeps on shopping.

Meanwhile, armies of market researchers and merchandise managers try to discover what Cindy wants, so they can sell it to her. For the past 30 years, market researchers have prided themselves on their ability to identify our values. Abandoning demographics for psychographics, they have stopped emphasizing our SES, or socioeconomic status (income, education, and social class), and turned to our VALS (values and lifestyles). They ask us not only about what we buy, but also about our dogs and cats, spouses, parents, religious attendance, and what we keep in our bathroom cabinets. On the basis of our replies, they place us in composite categories initially derived from Abraham Maslow's psychology of needs and David Riesman's studies of social conformity: We're inner-directed, outer-directed, traditionalists, or mavens of the avant-garde.

Whether they are pushing soft drinks, political candidates, or leather pants, however, market researchers think in terms of only a small number of options. Cindy's daydreams (or those of my mother, who can't find housedresses like the ones she bought in the '50s) may not fit into them.

The failure to find what we want is not the only reason shopping isn't satisfying. Most of us feel a conflict between shopping the way our mothers taught us and shopping the way stores, Web sites, and magazines urge. Nearly all of us still learn to shop with our moms: the trip to the supermarket in car seats and strollers, the tantrum in the cereal aisle over frosted or plain, the begging for a treat when we get to the cashier. When we are 9 or 10 (or sometimes even younger, if TV viewing has made us precocious consumers): arguing with our mothers over buying clothes with cool brand names. When we're 15 or 16: shopping with our friends. Those are rites of passage.

Teenagers whom I interview in East New York, a low-income neighborhood in Brooklyn, tell rueful stories about friends who bought Air Jordans or Tommy Hilfiger shirts cheap, on the street, only to find that the logos were spelled wrong. These young men claim to be savvier shoppers now. Chris makes a list of the clothing he needs before going to a store. Kwame heads for the outlet malls beyond the city.

All of the young men agree on one point: Going shopping with a girl is like "committing suicide," because girls insist on going back and forth between stores to find the "cutest" style at the lowest price. Even among teenagers, shopping becomes a source of tension in gender relations.

The mothers of the teenagers, with whom I also speak, are sadder and wiser shoppers. Like all parents of modest means, they stopped indulging their desire to shop for themselves when they began to have children. Leading small kids around a store is not conducive to daydreams about leather pants, or even jeans. Balancing a budget requires passing by the hair ornaments and teaching your children that Payless sneakers are just as good as Nikes. Revealing their own tensions over gender, the mothers claim that the children's fathers are more likely to buy the kids brand-name shirts or sneakers.

But when someone mentions the designer jeans that were popular when they were growing up, everyone chuckles fondly. "Gloria Vanderbilt!" they exclaim in unison. "Sergio Valente!!!"

America has always been a nation of shoppers. The dawn of mass production brought new ways to sell goods at affordable prices, and the department store, mail-order catalog, and five-and-dime expanded our cultural horizons. When the German economist Werner Sombart asked, in 1906, "Why is there no socialism in the United States?," he found the answer in the fact that American workers wore better clothes, and lived in bigger, more comfortable homes, than their European counterparts did.

In the 20th century, supermarkets and discount stores made shopping universal. Today, mass consumption has become an entitlement, like Social Security and veterans' benefits. Whether we study consumer guides or push our wire carts from warehouse club to outlet mall, we are searching for our dreams.

We can't be blamed if we see our dreams in stores.

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