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Mr Stewart Gandy

Product Placement Consultation
5th Floor
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London SW1Y 5DH

8 January 2010

Dear Stewart Gandy,

SUMISSION OF EVIDENCE –

Product Placement Consultation

I am sending you this formal submission to the government's Consultation on Product Placement.

First, I am attaching, as evidence, a relevant article I had published in *The Mother* magazine in Autumn 2005, entitled 'Born to consume?...' (which discusses, *inter alia*, Juliet Schor's important book *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, Scribner, New York); and I also append the full text of the Open Letter that was printed in edited form in yesterday's *Guardian* newspaper, and to which I was a signatory. You will have noted the distinguished list of signatories to this letter, which were collected at very short notice.

The arguments in both the Open Letter and in my article will be self-evident. As you will no doubt see from the many other submissions to this consultation, the evidence (which I will not rehearse here) is overwhelming that **the commercialization of childhood and of children's experience is**

culturally catastrophic for society as a whole, and for children's well-being in particular, and is merely pandering to materialistic and consumerist values which we now know from empirical research to be deleterious to human well-being. It is therefore clear that if the principle of product placement is allowed in law, evidence shows conclusively that there will inevitably be a negative impact on children's well-being, for which any government which makes this change in the law will be held directly responsible, in both the political short run and also by posterity.

It is especially disappointing that a Labour government should be making this extraordinary proposal; for quite apart from all the evidence which contra-indicates its advisability, the ethics of dragging children into a materialistic and consumerist experience of life at so early an age go fundamentally against the progressive, ethically informed socialist ethos for which the Labour Party and Labour Governments have stood for the past century.

In the name of our children's well-being, and for taking a principled stand against the wellbeing-hostile commercialization of every aspect of modern life, I urge you from my position as an academic, as a parent and as a concerned citizen to drop these highly damaging proposals, and to give society a strong signal that the government has deeply understood the crucial cultural signal that it has the opportunity to give on this issue.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Richard House
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Research Centre for Therapeutic Education
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ROEHAMPTON UNIVERSITY

APPENDIX

Open Letter printed in the *Guardian newspaper*, 7 January 2010

Full Text: “Back in 2005 Compass ran a campaign led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams to *end the commercialisation of childhood*. The campaign united individuals and organisations working in the children and parenting fields; teachers, members of the wider children’s workforce, health professionals, campaigners, academics, and politicians.

We are therefore alarmed at the Culture Secretary, Ben Bradshaw’s decision to allow product placement in television programmes for the first time. We believe that this decision can only fuel childhood obesity and exacerbate the problems caused by alcohol and gambling, moving us further away from our goal of ending the commercialisation of childhood.

There is a large body of academic work including recent studies by Dr. Richard Ryan and Dr. Tim Kasser, professors of psychology at the University of Rochester and Knox College, arguing that not only is seeking satisfaction in material goods unfulfilling, but further that people who put a primary focus on affluence also tend to experience a high degree of anxiety and depression, a lower sense of well-being, and greater behavioural and physical problems.

These problems are heightened in vulnerable groups such as children and young people. A study by the Children’s Society found that hyper consumption as part of the individualistic society is causing a range of problems for children including: high family break-up, teenage unkindness, commercial pressures towards premature sexualisation.

This is not a Party political issue and there is much consensus amongst all political parties. In March 2007 Gordon Brown said "over and over again, I hear parents express their worries about what some call the erosion of childhood." He added “the commercialisation of childhood... has exposed children increasingly to the pressures of very aggressive advertising.”

David Cameron recently spoke out against the “harmful and creepy” sexualisation of children, blaming irresponsible business for their aggressive approach.

For these reasons we, the undersigned encourage the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport and the Prime Minister to urgently review this decision.”

Signatories to the Guardian letter:

Neal Lawson *Chair of Compass*, **Jon Cruddas** *Labour MP*, **Christine Blower** *General secretary of the National Union of Teachers*, **Sue Palmer** *writer, broadcaster and consultant*, **Michael Rosen** *children's novelist and fifth children's laureate*, **Professor Steve Field** *Chairman of council, Royal College of General Practitioners*, **Peter Humphreys** *Chair, trustee, director, The Centre for Personalised Education and Personalised Education Now*, **Sally Goddard Blythe** *MSc FRSA Director, the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology*, **Melanie Gill** *Child forensic psychologist, policy adviser Psycho-politics*, **Greg Brooks** *Emeritus professor of education, University of Sheffield*, **Oliver James** *Author*, **Margaret Morrissey** *Parentsoutloud.com*, **Dr Richard House** *Research centre for therapeutic education, Roehampton University*, **Susie Orbach** *psychotherapist and writer*, **Janet Moyles** *Professor emeritus, Anglia Ruskin University*, **Professor Andrew Samuels** *University of Essex*, **Dr Maria Robinson** *Independent Adviser in Early Development*, **Jackie Schneider** *Chair of Merton Parents*, **Carl Honoré** *Author*, **Paul Cooper** *Give us Back our Game*, **Geoff Barton** *Headteacher, King Edward VI School, Bury St Edmunds*, **Jean Barlow** *Teacher consultant*, **Miranda Suit** *Founder, Mediamarch*, **Ernie Brennan** *Children's Football Alliance*, **Vincent Nolan** *Trustee, Synectics Education Initiative*, **Roland Meighan** *Trustee, The Centre for Personalised Education Trust*, **Wendy Ellyatt** *Independent writer and consultant in early years education OpenEYE campaign core team*, **Dr Marilyn Fryer**, *C.Psychol. Director, The Creativity Centre Ltd.*

Born to Consume? –

understanding and transcending the materialism rampaging through modern culture

by RICHARD HOUSE

‘Materialistic learning... dominates education... Education has become an institution whose purpose... is not to make culture, not to serve the living cosmos, but to harness humankind to the dead forces of materialism. Education, as we know it, from pre-school through graduate school, damages the soul.’

Robert Sardello

‘Materialism is correlated with low self-esteem,... higher rates of anxiety and depression,... [and] psychological distress and difficulty adapting to life... Consumer culture undermines children’s well-being... The children who are more involved in consumer culture are more depressed, more anxious, have lower self-esteem, and suffer from more psychosomatic complaints.... And less involvement in consumer culture leads to healthier kids...’

Professor Juliet B. Schor

Introduction

The technocratic mentality and its accompanying myth of materialism – together with their psychological manifestation, self-centred ego-consciousness - are deeply pervasive in modern culture; and we are all, of course, more or less consciously influenced by this *Zeitgeist*. In this article I want to raise some questions about materialism, consumerism and its place in modern culture, by looking first at the role that children’s education can play in either reinforcing or transcending a crassly one-sided materialism; and second, by briefly considering some recently published empirical research, the results of which confirm all of our worst fears about the profound harm that a poisonous materialistic culture does to our children if we as parents and educators fail to protect them from its worst excesses.

Materialism and/in Education

An education system will tend tacitly to reproduce and reinforce the prevailing values of the society of which it is a part. And at the start of the 21st century, the dominant world-view is still overwhelmingly that of materialism and consumerism – values, moreover, which increasingly saturate and define mainstream schooling systems. As I have pointed out in previous articles in *The Mother*, what we are increasingly witnessing is the uncritical ascendancy of a soulless *educational utilitarianism*, in which quantity prevails over quality, academics over artistic and craft-oriented pursuits, ends over means, goals and targets over process - head over heart.

Under such a system, children are arguably being conditioned into the very kind of limited, materialistic consciousness which it is surely humankind's urgent evolutionary imperative to transcend. In other words, if, as many of us believe, it is a poisonous cocktail of one-sided materialism and an uncritical subservience to soulless technology, allied with an associated chronic loss of meaning, which lies at the heart of our global malaise, then an education system which merely does its best to mimic these same values cannot but buttress and reinforce that malaise.

In contrast, an increasing number of concerned individuals the world over believe that our education system – in both its overriding philosophy and in its detailed procedural minutiae – should be at the forefront of the *evolution of human consciousness* that a spiritually mature way of living and being entails; and Steiner, home, and human-scale educational approaches are positioned right at the forefront of this global wave of educational models which are striving to find a better way to educate our children. In Steiner education, for example, which I myself practise, our vision is lifted above the materialistic, deterministic world-view of 'modernity', such that materialism is understood in its wider cosmic context, and not just as *the nihilistic end-in-itself* of the meaningless 'clockwork universe' so beloved of Professors Richard Dawkins, Stephen Pinker et al.

It is instructive to look briefly at what Rudolf Steiner himself had to say about these questions. In the Preface to his important book *Mystics after Modernism*, first published in 1901 and which looks deeply at the impact of scientific thinking on our inner spiritual life, he wrote: 'Only those who understand spirit in the sense of *true* mysticism can fully understand the reality of nature' (his emphasis). For Steiner, 'the divine is not something external to be recapitulated as an image in the human spirit. Rather, ...the divine is *awakened* within the human being' (his emphasis) – and for Steiner, such awakening must always be an act of freedom for every individual, free of religious dogma of any kind. At its best, then, Steiner education maximises the possibility of such a natural, *unforced* divine awakening – and of a deep-ecological awareness and re-enchantment - through creating a learning environment that continually strives for faithful developmental appropriateness in its pedagogy, and for a balanced engagement of mind, body, soul - and heart. Not without reason did Steiner emphasise the urgent need to (as he put it) 'put *the heart* back into education' – a task which is arguably far more pressing now than when he first said it almost a century ago, and about which I have written at length in *TM* issue 9 (2004).

In his inspiring (and more 'modern' than modern) book *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education*, Steiner revealed himself as a trenchant critic of modernity and its accompanying world-view. While always being careful to

acknowledge the achievements of modern science, he points out just how much its one-sidedness has ‘alienated the human being from himself’. On materialism, his critique is devastating, and has not been matched in terms of insight either before or since: ‘Materialistic minds can grasp only human thinking – and this is their tragedy... Materialism is the one view of the world which has no understanding of what matter is’!... Steiner emphasises how, in the dominant over-intellectualised climate of modern education, there has been a fundamental misunderstanding of children and child development, for ‘the child’s soul is so entirely different from that of a thoroughly intellectualized grown-up... A pedagogy which only observes outer phenomena does not penetrate into those regions of the human being that reveal what should be done with regard to practical life.’

With an implicit, thorough-going ecological awareness many decades ahead of his time, Steiner championed a truly *living pedagogy* – for ‘life is full of living movement, of transformation... it has to be comprehended in all its mobility’...; and ‘partaking in *the creativity of the world* is the very thing our present culture is waiting for’ (my emphasis). It is hardly surprising, then, that ‘If you [the teacher] come with something dead, *you inflict wounds upon what is... alive in the child*, you attack its sense of truth and reality’ (my emphasis)... - a highly prescient caution which those responsible for the deadening utilitarianism of the modern schooling system would do well to note and act upon.

For Steiner, then, the antidote to these pernicious forces consists in the qualities of *heart and love*. Thus he wrote, ‘In our work we need *forces of the heart*... that we ourselves have our heart in our pedagogy’. Steiner further maintained that it is *teachers* who stand in the forefront of bringing new impulses into our civilisation; ‘and an awareness has to emerge of how much needs to be changed... before a truly human form of education becomes established’. A more relevant and telling commentary on our culture’s educational and environmental malaise could scarcely be imagined. In Steiner education, then, we are quite self-consciously pursuing an education, the core of which is the highly ambitious goal of enabling *the mature evolution of human consciousness* in its fullest sense.

In order for the one-sided world-view of modernity to be transcended throughout global culture, the nature of child education can and must play an absolutely central role; and it is the kind of environment and the soul-nourishment carefully prepared and provided in Steiner and other holistic, spiritually informed educational environments that offers one of the greatest hopes for the evolutionary health of humankind.

In Steiner (Waldorf) terms, it is *the over-intellectualised culture of modernity* which is perhaps the chief architect of these maladies – as Rudolf Meyer puts it in his beautiful book *The Wisdom of Fairy Tales*: ‘mankind’s powers of reason [will] not alone be able to find contact again with the creative spirit. What [is] needed is *child-like qualities* to rejuvenate and permeate our whole being’ (my emphasis). Meyer goes on to recount the fairy tale of ‘The three languages’ (a fairy tale of great wisdom for all modern educationalists!) - in which a boy’s father has no patience with his young son’s appropriately slumbering powers of the mind and will, but instead wishes only to ‘get something into the boy’s head’. For three years running, the father sends his

son off to famous teachers to have him educated – only to be disgusted when ‘all’ the boy has learned is ‘the language of dogs, birds and frogs’.

Yet translated into modern parlance, these languages (‘of dogs, birds and frogs’) symbolise precisely the evolutionary shift in consciousness that humankind urgently needs to *re-member* and integrate to a new level of maturity, if we are to arrest our headlong stampede towards ecological Armageddon. And in Steiner education, we find just one fully articulated approach to re-balancing the potentially catastrophic one-sidedness of modern materialistic culture, to which both Rudolf Steiner and an increasing number of cultural commentators are deeply concerned to find a viable antidote.

Juliet Schor’s *Born to Buy*

In her recent and compellingly disturbing book, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, Juliet Schor does a magnificent job at exposing the worst manipulative excesses of modern American consumer culture, and the way in which modern corporate capitalism is actively ‘constructing’ modern children and childhood in its own craven image. A book like this should be required reading for all new parents, as it relentlessly outlines the manifold ways in which children are deliberately manipulated by advertisers and marketers for the sake of corporate profit. Indeed, if parents were to acquaint themselves with these disturbing realities, there would arise, virtually overnight, a burgeoning global movement against these toxic trends, a movement which before long would necessarily lead to a fundamental transformation in corporate mores and practices. In my concluding section, below, I suggest one way in which *TM* readers might make their own contribution, through this magazine, to such a global movement.

In her book, Professor Schor also reports the results of her own major survey of consumer involvement amongst some 300 American children, who answered her 157-question survey. Using a sophisticated statistical research procedure that enabled her to distinguish true causes from mere correlations (i.e. structural equation modelling), Juliet unambiguously found that **crass materialism and consumer capitalism are bad for your physical, psychological and spiritual health** – and this goes especially for young children, of course.

More specifically, Juliet found that the effect of media use ‘flows through’ consumer involvement. That is, television, for example, ‘induces discontent with what one has, it creates an orientation to possessions and money, and it causes children to care more about brands, products, and consumer values’ (cf. my article in *TM* issue 10, 2004). Moreover, she found that higher levels of consumer involvement result in worse relationships with parents; and that as these relationships deteriorate, there is then a secondary negative effect on measured levels of well-being.

In attempting to account for these ‘robust’ statistical findings, Schor speculates that consumerism and materialism actively create ‘strong feelings of dissatisfaction, unfulfilled longing, and a keen sense of social comparison’. In line with many spiritual traditions, moreover, it seems that ‘Desiring less, rather than getting more,

seems to be the key to contentment and well-being'. Next, there is an 'opportunity cost' to the consumer culture, in that it detracts from other, more beneficial behaviour, with children being 'less oriented to socializing with their peers, siblings, parents... They may be less engaged in satisfying, creative, and educational activities... [and] they may have less rich fantasy lives.' In sum, Schor concludes that 'the more enmeshed they are [in consumer culture], the more they suffer for it. The more they buy into the commercial and materialist messages, the worse they feel about themselves, the more depressed they are, and the more they are beset by anxiety, headaches, stomachaches, and boredom.'

There are, of course, a whole list of possible antidotes to a toxic consumer culture – indeed, in her Chapter 10, Judith Schor discusses many of them: viz. government regulation of advertisements and the media; an advert-free schooling system; increased social co-operation; and the decommercialisation of culture itself – food, media, and outdoor space. But what I am especially interested in is how real families on the ground are finding ways of introducing balance into their lives, and taming the materialistic monster – or what Schor calls 'the decommercialisation of the household'. There is a growing world-wide movement to oppose what Schor calls 'corporate constructed childhood', and it is a movement of which I am sure many if not the vast majority of *TM* readers are *de facto* members.

Some Final Thoughts

It is important not to *deny* the material, as some of the more rarefied New Age idealisms attempt to do – for *matter* is in some sense a reality, and one which we are arguably here on Earth to make sense of and discover a healthy relationship with (Rudolf Steiner's worldview of Spiritual Science is very relevant and helpful here). But all of the evidence points to the conclusion that modern culture possesses a thoroughly *unhealthy*, self-destructive relationship with the material; and it is to this most urgent of challenges that those incarnated at this juncture in human evolution must rise. And in the necessary re-enchantment of the world, we must launch challenges at every level of the personal and the political – from the mundane day-to-day life-choices that we all make from minute to minute, through relentlessly challenging the values and behaviour of corporate capitalism (which this magazine has a proud record of doing), to the geopolitical level of demonstrating against the recent G8 meeting at Gleneagles, Scotland.

I would like to invite readers to write in to *The Mother* with their stories and anecdotes describing their own particular journeys towards a healthy life balance which, while not unrealistically denying the material, puts it in its proper place and challenges its relentless, globalising attempt to colonise and commodify just about everything we do, think and feel. For by doing so, we can all learn from one another's experiences, and hopefully reinforce the global trend towards the *re-enchantment of life* which our ailing planet and the evolution of human consciousness so urgently require.

Richard House has a Ph.D. in Environmental Sciences (UEA), and is a trained Steiner Class Teacher and Kindergarten teacher and founder-member of the Norfolk Initiative Steiner School in Norwich, England. He is Senior Lecturer in Psychotherapy and Counselling at Roehampton University's Research Centre for Therapeutic Education, and writes regularly on educational and psychotherapeutic issues for various professional journals and magazines. Correspondence: richardahouse@hotmail.com

Useful Further Reading

- Kasser, T. (2002) *The High Price of Materialism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Kasser, T. and Kanner, A.D. (2004) *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.
- Ruskin, G. (1999) 'Why they whine: how corporations prey on our children', *Mothering*, November-December, pp. 41-8
- Schor, Juliet B. (2004) *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, Scribner, New York