The Poverty of Abundance

BY STEPHEN BAYLEY From the Los Angeles Times (Albuquerque Journal Wednesday, June 2, 2004)

It's time to revive Thorstein Veblen, nowadays a neglected figure.

His "Theory of the Leisure Class" (1899) is in that strange category of books both unreadable ' ' and immensely stimulating. Veblen' established the notion of conspicuous consumption = the process of social climbing by buying things. Chapter Six is about the "pecuniary canons of taste," or how money describes us. As Bob Dylan said, it tends to swear rather than talk.

A political economist, Veblen was called the last man who knew everything. He spoke 25 languages but understood best consumer desire and the perverse commercial logic that powers it: "Invention is the mother of necessity" was his marvelously cross wired coinage.

We all, have a guilty secret about the things we buy but never use. They inhabit a dark part of our imaginative lives — not F. Scott Fitzgerald's dark night of the soul where it is always 3 o'clock in the morning, but the space under the stairs, where possessions consumed in the passionate delirium of cupidity accumulate to mock us. Sex has its post-coital *tristesse,* consumerism has its post purchase. melancholy. A recent study showed that the majority of machines emerge from the chrysalis of their four-color polysealed packaging only to retreat into wretched desuetude. All subjective experience shows that deep-fat fryers, bread-machines and ice-cream makers, to offer, only a few examples, are quite literally useless for the purpose intended. They sit redundant in cupboards, telling stories about us, like 19th century servants chattering about their masters above stairs. Perhaps, one muses, this treachery is their true function.

Our poverty of abundance originated in the 1950s. The idea--then novel--was that continuing acquisition of supposedly ever-better-looking, ever-better-performing material goods made life perfect. Anyone who has actually driven a '57 Thunderbird knows the pitiable fragility of this vision, but for a moment Detroit defined this version of the American Dream with industrial thoroughness. The carmakers' introduced the annual model year, a travesty of "progress" because the changes were superficial.

Social critics, including Vance Packard, whose "The Hidden Persuaders" (1957) and "The Status: Seekers' (1961) picked up where Veblen left off, called it "planned obsolescence." A General Motors executive said, "We have not depreciated last year's cars, we have to appreciated your mind."

Hence the fateful appointments we have all made in car showrooms or appliance megastores. Here we can see consumer behavior; that is wonderfully odd — entirely predictable and utterly irrational. There is a tragic poetry about all of this We buy things and anticipate happiness, but the truth is the merchandise cruelly ridicules us. Cars equipped with "performance" that cannot be (legally) used. Home computers with memory sufficient to run the economy of Luxembourg. Deep-fat fryers we cannot be bothered to plug in after one failed experiment with tempura.

The things we want are weapons in our struggle for psychological survival — absurd, sometimes beautiful, almost always wasteful, sad. No one sensed this more keenly. Than Daniel J. Boorstin,

America's great popular historian. At one stage in a distinguished career, Boorstin was up against the House Un-American .Activities Committee, accused of Communist ties, but in his writings Boorstin had even more un-American activities in mind: to undermine gratuitous consumption through intellectual sabotage. He was a brilliant debunker of celebrity, of the absurdities of materialism and the ruinous contradictions of acquiring repute through dry goods. He wrote: "Nearly everything we do to enlarge our world, to make life more interesting, more varied, more exciting, more. `fabulous,' more promising, in the long run, has an opposite effect."

How to deal with this terrifying trap that objects lay for us? Eliminate as many of them as possible..

My favorite method is a test: the Absence Factor. it was devised by Jeremy Blimore, former chairman of the London office of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. You consider any object and give it a value from 0 to 100, depending on your estimate of how much you would miss it in a crisis.

Thus, the giltwood chinoiserie Louis XVI harp in the drawing room, to say nothing of the deep-fat fryer in the kitchen, scores very low while an ample supply of Kimberly-Clark's signature product—if in a gastroenterologcal crisis on, say, a train in Gujarat — scores very nearly the maximum possible points. Simple pleasures rarely disappoint.

Meanwhile the stuff piles up.