

Seminar One:

APOCALYPSE ON AISLE FOUR

One night, when I was a kid, I had this dream.

I am downtown. Before me is a wide city street flanked on both sides by silvergrey skyscrapers, their windows reflecting a pale blue sky.

A parade approaches. From my vantage point on the sidewalk, I see, down the street, the first rows of a marching band. The air between the skyscrapers echoes with a clattering, scrambling drumbeat that says "marching band" but doesn't seem very conducive to marching. The marching band passes. Floats glide down the center of the street. A half dozen weird giant head puppets bob up and down. Clowns on unicycles weave this way and that to keep their balance.

And then there's people. Regular people. Apparently, they are stepping off the sidewalk and strolling down the middle of the street. It's as though nobody ever told them a parade is a parade and a spectator is a spectator.

I get a strange feeling as in the air above the parade something coalesces, makes itself visible. Huge creatures, seven and eight stories tall, transparent as soap bubbles, are there. They move in the midst of the parade and, at the same time, they overshadow it.

The giant head puppeteers don't notice. The unicycle clowns do not all turn and look skyward. But there they are -- enormous, transparent entities like something one might watch undulating beneath a microscope, now made insanely, impossibly huge. It is, I realize, some kind of alien invasion. But it is so alien, so otherworldly that its presence goes unnoticed. Yet, somehow, this alien presence is the catalyst for the parade, is the actual energizing force behind each step the parade takes down the street.

In the dream, this revelation unnerves me, terrifies me. But I don't tell anybody. What would I say?

"Don't be controlled by those enormous transparent entities like something one might see undulating beneath a microscope now made insanely, impossibly huge. Shake it off!" These alien powers are invisible to the paraders in more ways than one. Somehow I know the problem isn't simply that they cannot be detected by the human eye. Rather, what the aliens are doing operates below cognitive radar. They are invisible because their business takes place below thought, below choice.

Whatever is in the parade, I realize, is in there good and deep.

Then I woke up.

I never forgot that dream. On the one hand, it made me think, "Oh, what an imaginative boy am I to have had a dream such as that!" On the other hand, I felt as though the dream wasn't from me. It came from somewhere else. And it felt like a warning.

When I am intrigued by something, I have come to expect a movie about it is just around the corner.

Seriously. When I learned of Ed Wood and his schlock movie cronies in the book, "Nightmare of Ecstasy," when I bought the Ed Wood cards drawn by Drew Friedman, and when I began to wonder if that old Goosebumps game in the closet could be transformed it into a "Plan 9 from Outer Space" boardgame, I was neck deep in obscure, fringe culture. Normal people like my Mom had never heard of Ed Wood. Normal people like my Mom were not magnetically drawn to schlock and kitsch like I was. Then, overnight it seemed, everybody knew about Ed Wood -- Edward D. Wood, Jr., mind you -- because Tim Burton talked Disney and Johnny Depp into making a slick, mainstream movie about the man. In thousands of theatres across this great land, normal people like my Mom watched Tor

Johnson get baptized in a swimming pool while Ed Wood talked the Baptists into bankrolling "Plan 9 from Outer Space"!

The same thing happened with my brief but intense interest in UFOs courtesy of an obscure little book called "The Mothman Prophecies," with my obsession over an overlooked and underrated comic known as Hellboy, and so on. You get the idea. Obscure interest. Major motion picture.

Naturally, therefore, I have long awaited the day when my alien invasion dream will make it to the big screen -- in all its obtuse, subliminal glory. I am, after all, a movie nut. And movie nuts look to movies to explain life to them. Therefore, I want a movie to explain my alien invasion dream to me, to flesh out all the logical possibilities of an alien invasion that nobody noticed, to follow the logic of the premise all the way to the last battle and the denouement.

So far, in terms of storyline, the closest fit has been John Carpenter's "They Live". In this film, a likeable, average Joe discovers that when he puts on an unusual pair of sunglasses he sees the world as it really is --- a hotbed of alien impostors and subliminal alien sloganeering. Billboards advertising Holiday Inn Express, he finds, actually, subliminally say, "Obey" or "No Imagination." The entire city, perhaps the world, is saturated with this deadening, oppressive alien propaganda. The glasses also reveal that walking down the street, casually mixed with the rest of us, are hundreds of thousands of aliens. Humanoid in shape, they look a lot like us -- except there's no skin covering their muscles and bones.

It's a clever idea and a surprisingly close match with my dream: the aliens are already here and they have established control invisibly through media saturation. Unfortunately, "They Live" lacks depth and detail. It rapidly adopts a hamfisted, nuts-and-bolts "Escape from New York" approach to the problem. When you start asking questions like "How could such an invasion happen under our very noses?" and "If the subliminal manipulation was effective, how did it affect people's behavior?", "They Live" shrugs and says, "Here, put on these special sunglasses. Now you can see those

weird alien dudes! Cool, huh?"

If only it had been David Cronenberg's "They Live"!

As I said before, film fans like myself often look to movies for insight about what's going on in their life. This is not necessarily a good thing. Not if you watch a lot of horror movies like I do. But this is really only the tendency to lean hard on art for the occasional epiphany that seems to put everything mysteriously in a better light. Novels tend to work a little better at this task. The Chronicles of Narnia kept me from despair one summer when my wife was seriously ill. Flannery O'Connor's short stories -- particularly "The Enduring Chill" -- helped me to move from agnostic to believing Christian. Flannery then teamed up with G. K. Chesterton, Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger, and Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson to help me appreciate the role apostolic succession and Tradition with a capital "T" have played in preserving the faith down through the centuries. And recently, I was propped up during a severe bout of depression and OCD --- what a delightful time that was! --- by Lloyd Alexander's "The Book of Three," "The Black Cauldron," and the rest

It was there, in the written word, that I found my invasion dream explained. The who, what, when and how -- dissected, labeled, catalogued and presented for all to see.

This invasion was not discovered, however, in an epic length science fiction novel. Nor was it concocted in Tolkienesque high fantasy.

No. This book, unfortunately, was non-fiction.

The book, written by Vincent Miller, assistant professor of theology at Georgetown University, is titled "Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture". Miller's book is about a phenomenon that is culture-wide, yet entirely subliminal. A happening that is as bright, brassy and cheerful as a passing parade that somehow, nevertheless, gives birth to a bland, wandering zombie-like existence. It is about forces vast,

formless and vague that, despite their ephemeral nature, meet us and direct us time and time again in the practical, prosaic daily decisions of life.

But forget I just said that. Instead, let me ask you a few questions.

While shopping, have you ever felt a strange urgency? Have you ever felt as though you had to make some wonderful discovery or else the whole day would be ruined?

While shopping, have you ever felt as though it was extremely important to buy something, anything, right here and right now in this mall? Not just a pack of chewing gum, but something personal, meaningful -- if only in a light-hearted way? Did it feel, strangely, as though you were trying to fix something that was wrong with you -- some flaw that you could not even begin to define?

While shopping, have you headed for some favorite activity, like flipping through cds or dvds, only to find yourself feeling listless and out-of-focus? Have you selected two or three items, carried them around with you for a long, drawn out stint of browsing, then abruptly put everything back and exited the store empty-handed, feeling awkward and isolated?

We are at a loss. The cause of these feelings is invisible, beyond our understanding. We've been in the parade long enough now to notice the symptoms, the telltale signs that we have changed somehow. But the parade is all we know. So we simply keep marching.

This is part of what happens in a culture-wide phenomenon Miller calls "commodification."

Commodities are simply items, typically mass-produced, offered for sale in the marketplace: dryers, iMacs, dish detergent, music CDs, Scooby Doo pajamas, you name it.

Imagine yourself walking into a Target. Imagine the women's clothing ahead of you, the checkout lines and impulse items immediately on your left. Those are all commodities. Turning to the left and walking down a wide main aisle, we pass the greet-

ing cards, the pens and notepads, the paperback books, the kids' books, then the dvds and cds, then the cameras and mp3 players. Commodities. Hang a right and you pass the various housewares as you approach the toy section at the back. Imagine you are passing that area where Target lines up their cool accessories cleverly developed according to a theme like "college dorm life" or "Hawaiian Tiki Party" or "Halloween." Imagine that one particular commodity -- a revamped version of the famous Kit Kat clock -- grabs your attention. It's tail swings back and forth in time with the ticking of its innards. It's eyes shift left and right with the kitschy enthusiasm of an old Betty Boop cartoon. You stop and you stare at it.

Commodification is the process by which daily interaction with commodities like this changes us.

In Miller's words, "Commodities appear on the scene, as if descended from heaven, cloaked in an aura of self-evident value, saying nothing about how, where, and by whom they were produced." We all know that moment of contact with an object of desire. It transports you. Your feet remain on the tiled floor of Target or Wal-Mart or Accessory Lady, to be sure, but your mind has shifted. You now operate in a separate, abstracted version of reality where desire is king. You are in a zone where you imagine yourself, your lot in life, somehow enhanced by the addition of this clock. The Kit Kat clock and its packaging facilitate this imaginative leap. The packaging doesn't go into great detail about the manufacture of the clock or the efficiency of its mechanism -- such extraneous details have been polished away. Obviously, this type of classic novelty clock has a history behind it -- a story of who, what, where, when and how it was first designed and developed. Even this has been reduced to an aura, a suggestion of Fifties era innocence. Whatever will facilitate the buying experience, whatever will lubricate that moment when we see the commodity and immediately assess our level of desire --- this has been emphasized. Whatever will engage other, more critical mental processes has been de-emphasized.

You decide to take the Kit Kat clock with you - just in case you decide to buy it. Occasionally, while you browse other shelves, you glance at it

and re-examine your feelings for it.

Prior to the advent of mass production, commodities were produced by craftsmen. We can see in antique tools and pottery, for example, the evidence of an individual effort, the touch of someone's hands. This gives the item an air of authenticity, of depth, of gravitas. A trained eye might read these details and discern the culture from which the item originated, design elements that reflect religious beliefs, production details based on the type of clay and minerals available in the area. One might notice the official mark of a particular master craftsman and call to mind his own personal history, that of one of his apprentices, or, for that matter, the history of the tools or pottery he specialized in.

Mass production and assembly-line management techniques changed all this. Individuals no longer pursued a craft, but found themselves going through the motions, quite literally, of machine-like assembly-line work. One cog in the assembly-line machine could not leave his or her mark on the end product. Discernable details that once spoke of skilled craftsmanship, history and culture disappeared.

You can't take the Kit Kat clock, turn it round in your hands, and say, "I believe this one bears the stylings of the sweatshops of Hong Kong." It's plastic, mass produced, shiny. It's a Kit Kat clock.

Judging the value of a product based on details of craftsmanship and skill became impossible. Advertising filled the gap. That is, with the rise of mass communication, it became possible for advertising to attach descriptive details to the commodity -- details that have less to do with facts than with mystique.

Instead of telling us about the product, advertising began telling us about ourselves. "People are talking about you behind your back because of dan-druff. We're here to help." Or, with incredible yet largely unquestioned abstraction, "This person is confident, happy, and attractive. She is driving a Honda Civic. You connect the dots."

Mass communication gradually became media saturation. As a result, we become more acquainted with the imaginary, advertised, media driven

version of the product than the real thing. It is the media double that has life in our minds. When shopping, instead of encountering the commodity as a manmade object and assessing its value according to workmanship and attention to detail, we encounter the commodity overlaid with its media-created double. When we see an iPod on a shelf, we don't see a cardboard box containing an mp3 player. What we see is a "media entity" made up of all the images and signals which the marketing department at Apple introduced to the marketplace and which the marketplace embraced and brought to life. It's not an mp3 player. It's an iPod.

This mystique, when I purchase an iPod, becomes my mystique. My own existence takes on life and immediacy in proportion to my absorption of various commodities and their mystiques. Because the iPod lives in the media, I live in the media.

What the commodity actually does is end up on a shelf in that closet down the hall beside all the other commodities that have charmed us. What happens to us -- what really, really happens to us regardless of what advertising may claim -- doesn't take place through owning the commodity. It takes place in and through the process of desiring, imagining, and purchasing -- which is repeated over and over again. Every day. Every week. Every month. Every year.

Because this is what we do. This is the parade.

True to my parade dream, commodification works below cognitive radar, beneath thought, prior to choice.

One, it affects how we think, which then circumscribes what we think.

Two, it trains us to substitute acts of consumption in place of genuine social activism.

Three, it leads us to adopt an ontology of lack rather than an ontology of grace. Or, as Miller puts it, "Consumer desire is... not really about attachment to things, but about the joys of desiring itself... It is the joy of endless seeking and pursuit."

First, commodification affects HOW we think, which then circumscribes WHAT we think.

You might assume commodification lends itself to comparison with Huxley's novel, "Brave New World" -- in which people are controlled by distribution of a "feel good pill" called Soma. Of course, there are plenty of comparisons to be made. But my mind immediately turned to George Orwell's dystopian novel, "1984". Orwell takes a very different approach to the future -- the oppression he describes is not cheerful and hedonistic, but cold, fascist and pleasureless. Not an obvious match with "shopping for happiness." Yet there is one aspect of "1984" that meshes perfectly with commodification -- and that is Newspeak.

In "1984", the powers that be maintain control of the present by the systematic manipulation of the past. History is rewritten to better support today's propaganda. We may be witnessing a similar revisionist approach to history in Japan's new breed of school textbooks and museums which reportedly sidestep Japan's roll in World War II. At any rate, in "1984" the editing of reality extends further than mere memory. Words themselves are systematically removed from common speech. Orwell himself described Newspeak in this way:

"The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of IngSoc [that is, English Socialism], but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought -- that is, a thought diverging from the principles of IngSoc -- should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meaning and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings... To give a single example - The word

'free' still existed in Newspeak, but could only be used in such statements as "The dog is free from lice" or "This field is free from weeds." It could not be used in its old sense of "politically free" or "intellectually free," ...Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought..."

Newspeak corresponds to commodification in this way:

According to Vincent Miller, "As commodification expands thru culture, it focuses on those elements of culture that can most readily be made into discreet elements of exchange."

What does Miller mean by "discreet elements of exchange"?

He means the commodity must be dumbed-down or, as he puts it elsewhere, "disciplined for market." All details that complicate, counter or distract from the mystique are whittled away, sanded down and polished. The whole package is smooth, accommodating, a "discreet element of exchange" offering little to no cognitive resistance when a potential buyer encounters it in the marketplace.

Artistic, ethical or religious detail may remain, but only in a suitably aerodynamic form. Stripped, that is, of anything requiring depth or discipline from the consumer.

A quick example of this. Imagine your favorite song. Now imagine the Muzak version -- the kind you might hear in an elevator in J. C. Penney's.

Got that?

Now imagine a friend is standing next to you. You have to explain why you love this song based only on the Muzak version playing in the elevator.

See? Muzak is to music as Newspeak is to language.

Now, here is how commodification turns our thought life into jello. Imagine a person whose entire concept of music derives from daily contact with Muzak. What would they do if a car drove by blasting the real thing? Would it sound like noise to them? Would their near constant contact with a dumbed-down fake serve as a kind of formation

in fakeness? Would their sensibilities have been stunted in such a way that they could not recognize, comprehend or enjoy the real thing?

Similarly, if daily interaction with a commodified spirituality trains a person, forms their intellect and their conscience, what will they do when they encounter a real test of faith? If you set out to follow Jesus only because of his teaching regarding the Father's love, if there is no mention of the fallenness of man and the seriousness of sin in your creed, what will you do when it is time to take up your cross? Will the cross have any place in your imagination? It is, after all, a cross -- an ancient form of violent execution, a thing of horror. If suffering has no expression in your Christian vocabulary, how will you conceptualize what is happening to you, except to conclude that a God who allows such suffering is not a God you can follow?

Result number two: commodification trains us to substitute acts of consumption in place of genuine social involvement.

Miller provides the example of a 1994 song, "Return to Innocence," by Enigma. A techno dance song, "Return to Innocence" contains samples of a tribesman singing an acapella folksong of some sort. Miller recalls enjoying the song, particularly the haunting sound of the tribesman's voice, for several years. Then one day Miller realized he was utterly ignorant about this sampling of tribal song. He had no idea what culture it was from, whether it was a religious chant, a birthing song, or a song of grief. For all he knew, it might contain a curse upon all those who listen to it! Perhaps the words made no sense at all. Perhaps what he heard was sentence fragments that were rearranged to accommodate the techno dance beat and so became total gibberish.

Miller was especially struck by the fact that this ignorance had felt natural for so many years. He admired the indigenous folk music. Somehow his "connection" with the music gave him the sense that he was "concerned" about the plight of indigenous cultures in the developing world -- which made him rather pleased with himself. Yet, at the very same time, in the very same brain, he re-

mained passive, unreflective, ignorant regarding the song's actual meaning and cultural origins. In fact, it never occurred to him to ask "Who is singing? What does this song mean to him?" until a story about the music appeared on National Public Radio.

How could this happen? Miller points to commodification. The sounds had been put to use in a manner that drew attention to their beauty, yet simultaneously reduced them to anonymous musical decorations. At one and the same time, the samples were valued and devalued. Their surface appeal was celebrated, while the actual details of culture, history and singer disappeared.

As it turns out, "Return to Innocence" made use of a traditional Ammi harvest song from Thailand sung by Difang Kuo. An "ethnomusicologist" in Taiwan filed a lawsuit on behalf of the tribe -- which was the subject of the NPR story.

In this example, substitution takes place in the following manner: millions, as they enjoyed the melody and rhythm, could feel they were somehow more aware of indigenous cultures, were more in touch with Third World realities, were perhaps even on a higher moral plane than others who might not appreciate such music -- without in reality accomplishing any of this to the slightest degree! An imaginary political involvement was generated -- a mood, a sentiment -- which served as a substitute for genuine activity.

We tend to receive lived reality as it is mediated to us through consumer culture. That which appears on the mass media map has life and respectability. We take part in this mass media alternate reality by consuming its products. Thus, instead of attempting some form of political action, we reach for a cd by a group of musicians who support the same political view or we buy a book about the civil rights movement. This sort of "solidarity through shopping" is as much involvement as we can manage -- or so we tell ourselves. There must be other people out there who are actually involved in political action groups, though we don't know how they find the time.

Other examples of substitution: Instead of praying, we watch a talk show about spirituality. In-

stead of learning traditional approaches to child rearing or nutrition or home repair from our parents and grandparents, we turn to a constantly shifting pantheon of experts and their books, videos and cds.

Suspicion works in us like a reflex. We automatically turn AWAY from tradition, history and community and TOWARD whatever is new, whatever calls itself "cutting edge," whatever sends us in solitary pursuit of personal improvement. This is no coincidence. In the early years of the twentieth century, traditional craftsmanship stood in the way of mass-production. According to Stewart Ewen, author of "Captains of Consciousness," a conscious effort was made by captains of industry to undermine traditionally made products. Advertising championed "modern scientific methods" of production and hygiene, turning a suspicious eye toward hand-crafted goods and homegrown remedies. Old and time-tested was trumped by new and improved.

And so, in our own day, life lessons passed down from one generation to the next stand in the way of the experts and their next wannabe bestsellers in the self help section. These experts, however, can be somewhat "disciplined for market." They offer a sloppy "anything goes" spirituality in place of the hard work of seeking the truth. A spiritual vibe is created that passes for genuine insight, a sentimentality that, as author David Dark puts it, "...tricks us into thinking we're looking into things deeply by flattering us into believing our own emotions as the height of sincerity." This sentimentality then passes for social consciousness, for enlightenment -- when it is merely a generalized passive connection to various noble causes.

The gist of it is: when we prefer the commodified ease of shallow signifiers rather than the moral and intellectual demands of the real thing, we will tend to substitute BUYING for DOING.

Commodification concomitant number three: commodification leads us to adopt an ontology of lack rather than an ontology of grace.

Ontology is the study of being. So, if we talk about

an ontology of lack versus an ontology of grace, we are talking about the largely unconscious prior assumptions we bring to the act of living each day. In the Hundred Acre Wood, for example, Eeyore seems to bring different and darker assumptions to the act of living out each day than, say, Pooh or Piglet.

Another way to put this is "Expectation is everything."

When I say this to myself -- and I have several times in the last year -- what I mean is, "You have to deal with reality as it truly is. There is more goodness and grace in the world than you can see. This is what we assume when we take Jesus at his word. There is, as well, an awful lot of evil and suffering in the world which we would like to avoid. But we will undoubtedly have to face some of it, because of this odd little detail of Christianity called 'carrying your cross.'"

With this sort of realistic expectation, previous generations could expect the goodness of God and, at the same time, expect to be thrown to the lions.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem put it this way when he taught new believers: "The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon."

Commodification also says, "Expectation is everything." But it means something entirely different.

What it means is, "The surest way to happiness -- or the closest you'll get in this life -- is not buying lots of things. Rather, real happiness consists in that moment of joy you feel just before you buy something. That moment of expectation teetering at the edge of fulfillment. Being a consumer means infinitely extending that moment by searching, always searching for the next big thing."

Or, as Miller puts it, "Consumer desire is... not really about attachment to things, but about the joys of desiring itself... It is the joy of endless seeking and pursuit."

Here's where ontology steps in: a person who embraces this state of mind does not define him-

self by what he IS, or even by what he owns, but defines himself by what he LACKS, by what he is reaching for.

This means he is a phantom, a ghost, and a hungry one. How can he stand to remain in this state of “needing to want things”? Why doesn’t consumer desire simply become boring?

According to Miller, consumer desire keeps itself going through two strategies: (1) seduction and (2) misdirection.

Seduction offers “...an endlessly renewed series of objects to desire.” A kind of happiness is achieved by repetition of longing for the object of desire, an ecstatic encounter with the object, and then, after purchasing, an immediate turning away from what one has and turning toward a new object of desire. This keeps everything fresh, new and interesting, allowing little time for disappointment with previous purchases or contemplation of one’s sorry state.

Misdirection is quite different. We are all familiar with the car commercial that has nothing to do with cars. Instead of listing the features of the car, the advertisement becomes a short, abstract film about self-assertion and self-actualization in a harsh, weather-beaten landscape. The calm complexity of the luxury SUV transfers its strength, balance and cool composure to the driver, who smiles with satisfaction. “I’ve got it together now, because my SUV has got it together.”

Similar psychodramas are acted out in commercials for shampoo, weight loss programs, sexual enhancement drugs, and so on. In each of them, the satisfaction of fundamental human psychological and social needs is linked to the product. As Miller puts it, “the drive to fulfill these needs” is channeled “into acts of consumption.” Thoroughly misdirected, we set out for Wal-Mart to fulfill our deepest longings. With the right choices, a smart shopper might even achieve wholeness.

But when acceptance, sexuality, environmental concern and personal success all hinge on consumer decisions, the act of shopping becomes overwrought. We feel we are looking for something, but we don’t know what it is. Too much is at

stake, it feels -- even though we are simply browsing through the DVD section at Best Buy. As Miller points out, “The very insatiability [of consumer desire] is driven by the fact that it exploits more profound longings.”

Seduction and misdirection both operate from an underlying idea -- that consumption is our context for being. In order to achieve self-actualization, we must consume various commodities and take into ourselves their various solutions to life’s problems. A consumer is one who lacks.

But this ontology of lack runs deeper still. Even in a commodified state of mind, we secretly know the object we are reaching for will not solve all our problems. This, one would think, brings on hopelessness. But hopelessness is avoided simply by reaching for something else, something new which promises innovation, or something nostalgic which promises a return to something we have lost. In either case, we manage to stay two or three steps ahead of hopelessness.

In a strange way, each act of consumption becomes a chance to re-imagine oneself. “Which choice is right for me?” would seem to be the question at hand. But since we are imagining our lives TRANSFORMED by possession of this or that commodity, we are really comparing different VERSIONS of our self. Me transformed by this book vs. me transformed by this other book. My life transformed by this car or a different life with this other car. Etcetera. The “me” that populates these visions is a media-influenced version of myself. So I really end up asking, “Which commodity is right for Commodity Me?” Each “new me” is filled with potential, with hope.

Thus, with enough wit and balance and zeal, we can stave off hopelessness by surfing constantly along the very edge of desire, always putting off consummation.

As Miller puts it, “Joy is sought in desire itself; thus, satiety and fulfillment become sources of regret... There is no room here for finality, for an end, for salvation. Consumer anticipation is a way of accommodating the endless repeat of the same, of finding pleasure in a world without hope. The inadequacy of the present moment is axiomatic.

This inadequacy, however, ceases to be a source of anguish, scandal, or judgement. It is reduced to the baseline of deprivation against which pleasures are sought and measured.”

What happens when this ontology of lack is still in at work, is still our basic premise, when we come home from shopping? What happens when use our “baseline of deprivation against which pleasures are sought and measured” to ask questions like “Am I satisfied with my marriage?”

Obviously, commitment and thankfulness are basic ingredients in marriage. When we resist desires which draw us toward an allegedly easier path, we exercise fidelity and gratefulness. Our will, informed by a vision of what is true, hangs on to what is most important in life even if it hurts. Commodification erodes this willpower. Consumer desire, by definition, always leads to the act of TURNING AWAY FROM WHAT WE HAVE in order to TURN TOWARD whatever claims to be new and improved. This becomes a reflex, a default setting. Surely, then, it affects our most challenging commitments. Why remain faithful regardless of negative feelings and experiences, if in other areas of life we simply trade-in, upgrade, or replace?

This makes for a striking contrast. Christ teaches that we are to serve our loved ones, pouring ourselves out like a libation. We are even told we must die to ourselves for the sake of Christ and the Gospel -- and that only through this death will we actually discover our true selves! Instead of being a consumer, we are to pour ourselves out. Rather than pursue commodification’s easily obtained, uncomplicated objects of desire in a constantly renewed range of choices, we die. Plainly, the mentality promoted in the commodification zone is at odds with any sort of serious discipleship.

Granted, following Christ involves its own deep experience of lack. An ontology of lack can feel rather natural, because we do profoundly lack something. We all need God. Even those fortunate enough to find God pine for greater intimacy. In this life, even with Christ within our heart, there is still a kind of lack, a privation. Otherwise, heaven would not be a consummation. As Saint Augustine famously put it, “Thou hast formed us for

Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”

What we do possess here and now in this life is unmerited grace. That is, we may operate based on an ontology of grace. This involves getting past the spectacle’s commodity logic and tapping into reality as it is described to us in divine revelation.

There can be no ontology of lack if you get this one truth into your head and heart: none of this HAD to be here. According to Scripture, everything around us -- the grass and trees, the birds, the air, the people -- did not arrive here out of necessity. Nobody held a gun to God’s head and told Him, “Create stuff!” Creation with a capital “C” was not mandatory. God created all this out of generosity, even out of fun. It is all as non-mandatory as a song or a painting or a novel. And, since He also made us able to appreciate and enjoy what He made, it is all a gift (as in “Oh, you didn’t have to do that!”).

It may be hard to imagine all this as a gift if you just finished watching the evening news and its litany of pain, loss and terror. But we are talking about what God made, not what man screwed up. According to divine revelation, even nature’s terrible upheavals can be traced to Adam’s fall from grace.

Which brings us to another aspect of an ontology of grace: suffering.

Saint Paul had an affliction of some sort and he found it practically unbearable. He asked the Lord to heal it. The answer was “No.” Paul tried to accept this, but found the affliction so difficult that he went to the Lord again, and later a third time. The Lord told Paul, “My grace is enough for thee; my strength finds its full scope in thy weakness.” Paul took this strange paradox to heart. Indeed, he pursued it to its logical end. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, he wrote, “More than ever, then, I delight to boast of the weaknesses that humiliate me, so that the strength of Christ may enshrine itself in me. I am well content with these humiliations of mine, with the insults, the hardships, the persecutions, the times of difficulty I undergo for Christ; when I am weakest, then I am strongest of all.”

Something in me insists that an experience of grace ought to feel good. Part of me insists it should arrive in the various feel-good flavors of commodification. But I am pretty sure this experience of strength in weakness did not give Paul a spiritual buzz. This grace was an invisible thing which, nevertheless, worked inside him. (Sound familiar? Perhaps it worked below cognitive radar, beneath thought, prior to choice.)

Invisible and imperceptible though it may be, it is still the very life of God poured into our hearts -- a kind of plenitude that operates at the core of our being.

Thus, we may honestly operate from an ontology of grace, an ontology of abundance. As Paul reminded the Galatians, "Yes, it was grace that saved you, with faith for its instrument; it did not come from yourselves, it was God's gift..." And then, later in the same letter, "May he, out of the rich treasury of his glory, strengthen you through his Spirit with a power that reaches your innermost being. May Christ find a dwelling-place, through faith, in your hearts; may your lives be rooted in love, founded on love. May you and all the saints be enabled to measure, in all its breadth and length and height and depth, the love of Christ, to know what passes knowledge. May you be filled with all the completion God has to give." This is no ontology of lack. This ontology presumes a grace that is not merely sufficient, but superabundant with "all the completion God has to give."

Commodification takes that primordial lack we experience as a result of Adam's fall and, with deft slight-of-hand, uses it to sell us expensive Yu-Gi-Oh band-aids. Grace takes that deep privation and transforms it, by God's strange goodness, into a participation in the sufferings of Christ. No amount of repackaging can "discipline" this truth for market. If we participate in the profound "lack" which Christ willingly embraced on the cross, we participate in plenty, in the power which raised Christ from the dead, in "all the completion God has to give." Or, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, we are "...heirs of God, sharing the inheritance of Christ; only we must share his sufferings, if we are to share his glory."

There are commodified forms of spirituality aplenty. This is not one of the themes you will hear preached in them.

So -- do you see the parade in all this? Isn't it creepy?

The parade looks grand and cheerful and inviting. Remaining on the sidewalk seems, by contrast, rather sad and ridiculous. Similarly, Targets and Wal-Marts and malls are a bright and shining oasis in a desert of highways and parking lots and office buildings. Stepping through those sliding glass doors, sauntering past big ceiling mounted posters of shoppers in various states of ecstasy, and pouring over all the things we could buy is a refreshing change from the drudgery of our daily routine. What would we do without it? Where would we go? What, exactly, would we pursue? That moment of discovery when we find something special for ourselves provides a kind of cheerful glow to the weekend. Shopping for happiness -- sounds like a parade to me -- becomes a reflex, like reaching for water when you are thirsty. Therefore, the parade is good.

But something is at work in all this. Something is in the parade, controlling it, and whatever is in the parade is in there very deep. As Bill Talen puts it, "I'm standing in the thickest vortex of corporate logos. The power is greater than any historical monarch, stronger than any villain with an army. But the power I want to speak truth to is completely amorphous. It pretends it isn't there while it controls your life." There seems to be a kind of compulsion at work. The parade keeps going as though some grand destination were ahead, but it begins to seem like the parade is... well... it's own justification. Our deepest longings for wholeness and even love have been harnessed and we will march practically anywhere in the hope of fulfilling them.

In the dream, I could only stand there and watch. Direct argument would have little effect. The shapes of the forces behind the parade are changeable and translucent. One can only see them when in a certain slant of light. Similarly, commodification and consumer desire aren't teachings or creeds

that one might openly denounce and refute. The traditional Christian response to false teaching is to expound truth with greater clarity, but that won't work here. Rather, commodification has to do with habits of the mind, with, as Miller puts it, "habits of interpretation and use." The response, therefore, must take place on a habit-forming level, so that the reality of Jesus Christ finds expression in daily acts of recognition and devotion and we come to see things as they really are under the aspect of eternity rather than in their commodified form.

As I said before, John Carpenter's film, "They Live", doesn't adequately flesh out questions like "How could such an invasion happen under our very noses?" and "If the subliminal manipulation was effective, how did it affect people's behavior?" It seems to me that as subliminal alien invasions go, the commodification of culture described by Vincent Miller and other cultural critics fits the bill very nicely. Today, we've fleshed out the question "If the subliminal manipulation was effective, how did it affect people's behavior?" Tomorrow, we will look at "How could such an invasion happen under our very noses?" And then, on Sunday, we'll consider what sort of resistance movement is required.