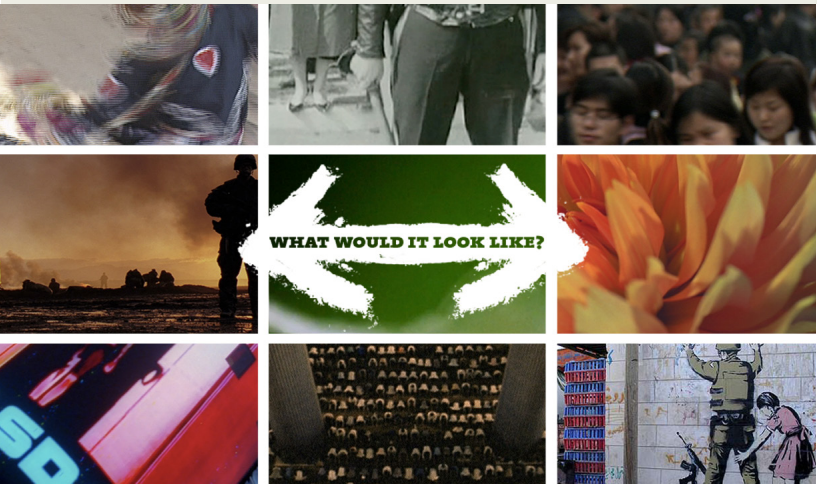




LESSON PLAN

Deconstructing Consumerism



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What Would It Look Like?

BY EMMANUEL VAUGHAN-LEE



Deconstructing Consumerism

Key Idea

Increased global consumerism has vast environmental, economic, and social repercussions. Thought leaders across the globe investigate the unsustainable cultural values at the root of modern consumption.

Background

This film, shot in Ecuador, India, the Middle East, South Africa, and the U.S., provides perspectives from global thought leaders concerning the negative effects of consumerism and globalization. According to the Worldwatch Institute, the United States, with less than 5 percent of the global population, uses a quarter of the world's fossil fuel resources—burning up nearly 25 percent of the coal, 26 percent of the oil, and 27 percent of the world's natural gas—for mass production of goods and services.

Consumerism, the concept that an increasing consumption of goods is greatly beneficial to the economy was an intentional shift from product utility to desires. The origin of a consumer society as we know it today can be traced back to 18th century England. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the availability of consumer goods greatly increased and for the first time consumers could choose to purchase goods because they wanted to rather than out of need. The rapid expansion of the advertising industry in the 1920s—when American corporations began linking mass-produced goods to unconscious desires—dramatically changed patterns of consumption around the world. Automobiles, television sets, clothing, and household appliances became widely used to express cultural values, and began to take on meaning and shape lifestyles. Consequences of mass consumption include severe environmental degradation, conflict over limited resources, health issues, unsustainable personal debt, and more.



Film: 25 minutes

Class: 120 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Environmental Science
- Modern World Studies
- Psychology

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Environmental Studies
- History
- Economics
- Sociology

THEMES

- Consumer decision-making
- Need versus greed
- Global economy

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

PREPARATION

- None



Connections to National Standards

Connections to National Standards Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5. Make use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. D2.Eco.11.9-12. Use economic indicators to analyze the current and future state of the economy.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-7. Design, evaluate, and refine a solution for reducing the impacts of human activities on the environment and biodiversity.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the film by asking students to define what it means to be a consumer during the holidays. How do they make choices on what they buy? What influences their decisions? Ask students to think about how they are persuaded by ads on TV or the internet. What makes a successful ad?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Explain that students will watch a film that explores the role of consumerism on a global scale. Invite students to pay attention to the images in the film that represent a consumerist lifestyle. While watching the film, ask students to write a list of these images and consider which images stand out the most to them.

Delving Deeper

1. After viewing the film, ask students to share the images they wrote down while watching the film. Write a list of these images on the board. Ask students: What impact do these images have on you as the viewer? What makes them appealing or unappealing?



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2. Lead a discussion on what it means to be a consumer with such questions as:
 - Choosing from the list of images students created, ask what they would consider giving up for a day or a week. Some examples include cell phones, cars, television, etc. What could be gained from this experience?
 - When purchasing items, how do you distinguish between a need, something you have to have, and a want, something you would like to have?
 - In the film, actor Cliff Curtis says, “We are still trying to colonize one another’s minds. We’re still trying to tell people what to think.” What do you think he means by this? How is it possible to tell people what to think?
 - What do you think makes a person want to consume and buy more? Are you, or someone you know, persuaded by advertising? Do celebrity ads or peer pressure contribute to your purchasing habits? If so, how?
 - How do you think this film reflects people’s behaviors in the world?
 - In the film, Buddhist monk Tenzin Palmo points out that billions of people in developing countries are dreaming of having cars, televisions, and refrigerators. She said, “They’re not thinking about going back to what they had before which was very little and contentment.” In ads and movies, Palmo says, they see ordinary people living like gods and they think that’s what they want. What could be the danger of pursuing happiness through the ownership of one’s possessions, such as a television? What dangers do you think Palmo sees for people around the world who desire to have products to make their lives easier or happier?
 - High unemployment rates impact individuals and the nation’s economy. Do you know anyone in your family or community who has been affected by unemployment? How has this affected their way of life?



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- If you could rename the title of this film including the word “economy,” what name would you give it?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. “How many people live in a world where their world no longer matters because they don’t have money?” asks community activist Orland Bishop in the film. A homeless man is shown in the next image. In some states, the economic impacts of homelessness is significant, with local, state, and federal governments spending lots of money on programs and services to assist the homeless. What is the value of life without money? Do you think programs and services for the homeless are necessary? Why or why not? (C3.D2.Eco.11.9-12)
2. If you were an advertising executive creating a TV commercial, how would you convince consumers to buy your new cell phone product? What audience would you target? How would you make your ad persuasive and memorable? For example, would you use a catchy song or a repetitive phrase? What do you think makes an ad successful? Why? Ask students to share their ideas with the class. (CCSS.ELA.SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5)
3. Identify some of your own possessions that you currently don’t use. Which of these might be revitalized, reused, or repurposed, either for your own use or by others? Do you think this could be a one solution for minimizing the impact of consumerism? Why or why not? (NGSS.HS-LS2-7)
4. Has your thinking about consumerism changed? If so, in what ways? (CCSS.ELA.SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5)



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Resources

Christopher Lasch, "[The Culture of Consumerism.](#)" Smithsonian Education.

Graham Hill, "[Living With Less. A Lot Less.](#)" *The New York Times*, March 9, 2013.

Vicky Grinnell-Wright, "[Consumerism Christmas – the sustainability dilemma.](#)" *The Guardian*, December 17, 2012.