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## THE CULTURE OF SCARCITY

By Reed Johnson

We shopped. Then we dropped. Then we started making culture again -- dancing on the rubble of our own excesses, stitching together art from the ragbag of our desires.

Every generation or so, throughout modern American history, the culture of hardship has followed hard on the heels of the culture of consumption and prosperity.

The financial shifts and shafts of the late 1800s spurred Mark Twain's skeptical wit ("He is now fast rising from affluence to poverty") and Thomas Nast's savage caricatures. In the 1930s, the banks panicked, the Champagne bubbles burst and our ancestors went from black tie to bib overalls, dance crazes to down-home hootenannies, "Blue Skies" to "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" and "decadent" modern art to the reassuring pictorial homilies of Grant Wood and Norman Rockwell.

The inflationary oil shocks of the 1970s sent many Americans scurrying backward in time to "The Waltons" and "Little House on the Prairie," to mind-numbing "soft rock" and patriotic uplift like "Rocky." On the dark cultural flip-side of the stagflation era, Kurt Vonnegut, Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis satirized a consumer mind-set that had come to resemble crack addiction. Urban life and the American city were vilified as agents of corruption and symbols of national decline in neo-noir Hollywood offerings such as "Taxi Driver," "Death Wish" and "The Taking of Pelham One Two

Three."

(An opportune Tony Scott remake of the latter, with Denzel Washington and John Travolta, is slated to open this year. Striking the retro-rebel outlaw pose one better, Johnny Depp will star in Michael Mann's upcoming film about legendary Depression-era bank robber John Dillinger.)

When good times go south, Americans typically either have turned for relief to defiant gallows humor or, conversely, sought comfort in idealized visions of a purer, resilient, close-knit Heartland, far from the scoundrels on Wall Street and their political enablers in Washington.

So now that unhappy days are here again, some commentators are predictably predicting a coming "culture of restraint," a resurgence of thriftiness, self-reliance and homespun values, as if Americans were going to ditch their flat-screen TVs and gas-guzzling vehicles and take up quilting and reading Emerson by candlelight.

Tony Scott remake Others say the barbarians finally have reached the gates and we're basically living out a remix of the Roman Empire's waning days, so we might as well just enjoy what's left of the bread and circuses. Enter "The Brokers With Hands on Their Faces Blog," a deadpan, online montage of some seriously stressed-out financial wizards.

But neither the aesthetics nor the attitudes that underpinned previous cultures of boom and bust apply in quite the same way today. Britney Spears isn't likely to put out a CD of Woody Guthrie covers. Louis Vuitton probably won't sign up Annie Leibovitz to shoot the photo spread for a "Migrant Mother" fall fashion collection. Yet scattered hints exist of a future culture that might hold mindless acquisitiveness in check.

### **No shared culture**

What's different this time around from previous recessionary periods? For one thing, as University of Texas professor Richard Pells points out, the mass culture of the 1930s and '40s (when 75% of all Americans went to the movies at least once a week) has been balkanized and splintered into a thousand niche markets.

"We don't have the sense of a shared common culture that we did in the '30s or after World War II," says Pells, author of "Radical Visions & American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years." "Movies were always, with radio, the common culture. There's nothing comparable today."

Bye-bye, Frank Capra. Hello, Gizmodo.com.

What's more, Pells says, the dirt-streaked faces of Dust Bowl farmers and despairing Southern sharecroppers lent themselves to an instant cultural iconography during the Great Depression: heroic proletarians marching resolutely in post office murals; thousands of Okies in Model Ts streaming toward California like wagon trains. By contrast, the great economic collapse of 2008, with its huge, international cast of players and its abstract jargon ("subprime

mortgages," "illiquidity") may be harder for artists and culture-makers to depict in a few simple words or images.

Most important, the United States today is more of a technology-driven consumer society than an aspirational one in which the majority of the population still hasn't attained middle-class status (as was the case in the 1920s). When the stock market crashed in 1929, most Americans were agrarian-based and poor by modern measurements. A much smaller percentage owned stocks than do now..

Today, consumption is deeply embedded in virtually every creative transaction, literally hard-wired into the way that culture is produced. As critic Carina Chocano recently wrote in the New Republic, with the glut of shows like "Real Housewives," "Extreme Makeover" and others of their ilk, "the mad dash to the register has replaced the sitcom setup, joke, setup, joke as TV's most basic building block."

New York Times pop critic Jon Pareles has noted that, with the declining power of record labels and the proliferation of free Web downloads, musicians have shifted "from recording songs that ordinary listeners want to buy to making music that marketers can use."

Starbucks muscles its way in as the new arbiter of quality music. Online readers searching for news about the Darfur famine first must negotiate a tangle of pop-up ads.

Stay tuned for the new reality shows for the Age of Austerity: "Who Wants to Lynch a Millionaire?" and "Dancing With the Foreclosure Agents." And for feature films, how about "The Devil Wears Wal-Mart," in which Meryl Streep stars as the reviled manager of a 24-hour McDonald's drive-thru

window in western Ohio?

High-culture denizens caught the same bug as did Hollywood. During the fat years of the 1990s and early 21st century, the underregulated fine art market -- propped up by over-leveraged hedge funds -- also grew hypnotized by the lure of easy cash. Nouveau collectors bought trendy contemporary art on speculation with the aggressive avarice of Miami Beach condo-flippers.

"People were buying with their ears, not their eyes," says Richard Feigen, a New York dealer and author of "Tales From the Art Crypt." "They were buying because they heard it was the thing to do. They bought into the idea that this market could only rise."

But does it follow that Americans, terrified and chastened by the economic meltdown, will go back and consult their Poor Richard's Almanack on the virtues of thrift? Does a 70% pre-Christmas sale at Saks herald the birth of a spirit of sacrifice and moderation? Are we really witnessing what a style writer for the New York Times called "a Botox backlash," a recent drop-off in vanity surgery that is "a harbinger perhaps of a new climate of restraint in which overt augmentation seems like bad taste"?

The instant labeling of an era is, in itself, a form of commodification, an attempt to brand-name and market a cultural epoch.

But an incipient American (counter-)culture may be emerging, based on evolving notions of community, transparency, an emphasis on cultural recycling (fabric scraps, music samples) and a growing interest in the world east of Long Island and west of Hawaii. In art, movies, fashion and Internet social networking sites, we can see the vague

outlines of such a culture taking shape, less idealistic but maybe more pragmatic than the Hippie Utopianism of the 1960s.

"Slumdog Millionaire," a movie set in the slums of Mumbai that satirizes the globalization of the get-rich-quick mania, is an Oscar contender for best picture. Another of last year's key films, "Wall-E," warns of a future in which consumer comforts have trapped the human race in a state of arrested infantilism, turning us all into slovenly big babies.

In the 1930s, pop culture invited Americans to escape into suave, Fred Astaire fantasies of the high life or, alternatively, reinforced the idea that people were better off making do with less. Some of this second outlook could return, historian Pells says. "You're getting a lot of talk today about the need not only to reform but to reexamine values."

### **Ethical consumers**

Among those urging such a reconsideration is Christina Kim, a Korean-born, Los Angeles-based fashion and housewares designer whose admirers include Jennifer Aniston, Julia Roberts and Nicole Kidman. With her eco-friendly company Dosa, Kim has incorporated into her business model several principles she believes can help promote a more moderate and ethical type of consumerism.

"I was born in 1957, right after the war," Kim says, "so I really went through a whole stage where we didn't have much resources. So whatever we found we had to use all the way from beginning to the end."

Many of Kim's creations recycle fabrics and scraps. She fights "planned obsolescence" by finding second and third lives for old materials, harvests natural dyes and employs

seamstresses from India, Oaxaca, Mexico, and other places at above-normal wages.

Kim says that when given the choice of paying more for a hand-crafted, environmentally sustainable object that encourages better worker conditions, many customers will choose to consume less, picking quality over quantity. Many of the same principles have been adopted by the growing "local food movement," which seeks to build healthier, lower-carbon-footprint food production and distribution networks.

In yearning for a "culture of restraint" and a spirit of shared sacrifice, Americans really are yearning for national unity, i.e. community. The early 21st century culture of hardship won't be Diego Rivera murals and "The Grapes of Wrath" ("Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there"). We're not going to un-invent iPhones and criminalize Botox.

Alladi Venkatesh, a professor of management at UC Irvine, says that a resurgent American culture in the challenging years ahead may need to be grounded in small, grass-roots community efforts and experimentation, and in pooling local resources. The Indian-born academic suggests that the nation's long cultural traditions of self-reliance (Emerson, Thoreau) also could serve as modern-day inspirations.

But, he cautions, "it takes time for people to change their value systems so they can appreciate those kinds of things."

Or, possibly, rediscover them.