ADVERTISING AT THE EDGE OF THE APOCALYPSE

Featuring Sut Jhally

[Transcript]

Introduction

Sut Jhally: Advertising surrounds us everywhere, and is now as much a part of our daily lives as the air we breathe. But most of us think it has no real effect on us at all, that we're too smart to be taken in by it, that we can just ignore it, click past it or block it from working on our minds. But no matter how much we think we can outsmart it, there's no getting around the fact that advertising is the dominant storytelling force of our time.

Over the past 100 plus years, more thought, more effort, more creativity, more time, more attention to detail and more overall money has gone into advertising than any other campaign in human history to mold consciousness. The result has been a non-stop flow of ever-more sophisticated and visually stunning and powerful commercial appeals -- expertly crafted stories that tap into our deepest fantasies and desires and speak to the very core of our emotional lives, telling us over and over again that happiness and satisfaction are linked to consumerism and the consumption of things.

So, the real questions we have to ask are about the larger, cultural impact of the stories of advertising. About how these stories have come to shape our sense of ourselves, our values as a society and how the consumer mindset that advertising celebrates is feeding an endlessly accelerating cycle of consumption that is literally pushing the planet to the brink of collapse.

My name is Sut Jhally, and for the last 30 years I've been looking at how advertising as a storytelling system shapes the perceptions, values and priorities of those of us who live in consumer capitalist societies. One of the most striking things I've come to realize is that very few of us actually stop to think about how it works, and what it's really doing to us as a society.

The visionary author Marshall McLuhan once remarked that media images and messages have become so pervasive a part of our cultural environment that they often disappear from view.

[Archive video]

Marshall McLuhan: It's like the fish in the water. We don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't the fish. A pervasive medium, a pervasive environment, is always beyond perception.

Jhally: And this is clearly the case with advertising. Like the proverbial "fish in the water" we are so immersed in advertising that we hardly even notice it anymore. Along the way,

we've lost sight of just how completely and methodically corporations have taken over the culture.

The Commercial Takeover of the Culture

Jhally: Over the years, advertising has come to literally colonize the culture, taking up more and more physical space, creeping into virtually every nook and cranny of the visual and audio landscape, driving out other possible ways of thinking and being as it competes for our attention non-stop. It's an imperialist project from which there's no escape. Even if we were to somehow give up our smartphones and other screens, advertising in corporate brands would be impossible to avoid -- confronting us at every turn as we make our way through the spaces and places of daily life. And the sheer amount of time, talent and money that businesses have expended to accomplish this has been nothing short of astonishing.

Corporations now spend more than $200 billion a year on advertising in the U.S. alone. A figure that's greater than the total GDP of many countries. Globally, the total amount spent on advertising is $570 billion a year. These are not just like other media messages. They are carefully and meticulously crafted by the best creative talent the society provides. For instance, TV ads now cost much more to produce than the programming that surrounds them. So, 60 minutes of television programming now costs an average of about $4 million to produce -- about $33,000 for every 30 seconds. In comparison, producing a 30-second network ad costs about $352,000, ten times as much, translating to a cost of $42 million to make 60 minutes of ad content. That's just the average.

When you realize that more and more 30-second spots now cost over a million dollars to produce on their own, it starts to become clear just how much time and attention goes into putting ads together.

[Making of Victoria's Secret ad]

Victoria's Secret model: We walked into this beautiful room, so old, with all marble arches, and there's rose petals all over the floor.

Victoria's Secret model: We shoot for five days, all for 30 seconds...

Jhally: No detail is left to chance. In fact, if you wanted to compare advertising to anything, it would be the biggest blockbuster Hollywood films, like the *Transformers* franchise. Actually, a number of the biggest directors in Hollywood are now actually making ads in between making movies. For example, Michael Bay, the director of the *Transformer*s films has shot many commercials, including Victoria's Secret, Budweiser and Nike. Even Martin Scorsese, the legendary Hollywood director of movies like *Taxi Driver* and *Goodfellas*, has made ads for Chanel and Dolce & Gabbana, starring A-list Hollywood actors.

[Dolce & Gabbana ad]

Ad narrator: Dolce & Gabbana. The one.

Jhally: The amounts involved in producing some ads are just mind-numbing. Baz Luhrmann, the director of the Oscar-winning film *Moulin Rouge*, made a short three-minute film for Chanel No. 5 that starred Nicole Kidman and cost a staggering $42 million -- for a commercial! But actually, the amount spent on producing ads are dwarfed by the billions of dollars corporations spend on making sure they get seen. The main way they've done that is by taking over the media and essentially turning them into a delivery system for their ads.

Just look at where the money comes from to support various media. Broadcast television and radio rely on advertising revenue for pretty much 100% of their income, so their main function, the actual purpose of TV shows is to get our attention so it can be sold to advertisers. Similarly, newspapers get roughly 80% of their total revenues from advertising, and as the content moves online, that figure is growing. The magazines rely on paid advertising for roughly half of their income. That's one of the biggest reasons why, over the years, commercial media outlets have been allotting more and more time and space to advertising, and allowing actual programming and editorial content to shrink. For example, on television, in 1952, ads accounted for about 13% of the time. Today, that figure has doubled so that advertising now makes up about a quarter of what is on television, and much more on some channels.

But advertising isn't just crowding out content. More and more, it's actually making its way into content, thanks to the trend of product placement. Sometimes this is done by having the product featured in the scene. Other times, it's by having the product become part of the dialogue.

["Hawaii Five-O" – Subway product placement]

Man: I'm trying to eat smarter, brother.

Woman: Shrimp? Perfectly healthy.

Man: Not the way I make 'em. But this Subway sandwich? Sweet onion chicken teriyaki with jalapeños and banana peppers. Bam!

Jhally: And sometimes, the stars of the show actually pitch the product itself, talking about what makes it so great.

["Bones" – Prius product placement]

Man: How about "nitwit" or "doofus?" *[car beeps]* What was that? What's going on?

Woman: Adaptive cruise control. When the Prius senses the car ahead is too close, it warns you and slows down.

Man: Oh, right. So, the car's smarter than our victim.

Jhally: But product placement is probably the most prevalent in Hollywood films where movie producers routinely accept money in exchange for featuring brand names within the films themselves. In the James Bond franchise, for example, the website for the 2015 film

Spectre listed a dozen or so brands that appear in the film, what they call "business partners" -- a collection of branded products that are then often featured in scenes and, at times, they've been written into the actual dialogue of Bond films.

[*Casino Royale* – Omega product placement]

Woman: Rolex?

James Bond: Omega.

Woman: Beautiful.

Jhally: On a parallel track to the product placement phenomena, more and more movies themselves have become vehicles for selling billions of dollars' worth of merchandise. Take the *Star Wars* franchise.

[Fox News]

Reporter: It's worth remembering that the box office receipts are only one part of the *Star Wars* money-making machine. Experts predict that the sale of themed toys could bring in another $3 billion.

Jhally: While the films have sold a lot of movie tickets, the box office income is dwarfed by merchandise sales -- things like toys based on the characters and gadgets in the movies.

[*Star Wars* toy ad]

Ad narrator: You can discover authentic adventure with the *Star Wars* Micro Machines collection! Figures, vehicles and playsets each sold separately.

Jhally: In addition to the merchandise, there are also the billions of dollars that come from the licensing deals to put the *Star Wars* brand on anything from Lego sets to mac and cheese. So, think about the films not only as cultural texts, but just as really long ads for the all the stuff that can be sold with the *Star Wars* brand emblazoned on them. And that's the general logic of Hollywood films now -- selling stuff, not just tickets. And this commercial colonization of popular culture extends to other areas as well.

Look at professional sports, which are now totally integrated into the machinery of marketing. Corporate logos and product pitches are everywhere in ball parks, in stadiums, in arenas, positioned expertly for every camera angle so that they're impossible to miss during a television broadcast. And increasingly, athletes themselves have become human billboards, fully branded and emblazoned with corporate logos. Even institutions that were once thought to be outside of the market are now fully enmeshed in the world of advertising.

[NBC News]

Reporter: Call it the new math in education funding. Cash-strapped districts, like this one outside Orlando, have resorted to selling advertising in schools. Banners here support a

couple of restaurant chains, a sportswear maker and a local yogurt shop. And at game time, the announcements are no longer just for raffles and bake sales.

Announcer: You need the complete sports drink. Powerade ION4.

Reporter: Seven states now allow ads on school buses, and this high school in Minnesota is putting them right on student lockers. The district even created a new position -- Director of Sales.

Jhally: Not content with occupying all available space on Earth, at one point in the 1990s, advertisers came up with the idea of colonizing space itself, proposing to launch a rocket 200 miles into orbit and unleash a giant billboard inflated with gas.

[NBC News]

Reporter: The Mylar billboard would measure about 2/3 of a mile across and 1/4 mile tall. From Earth, it might appear about half the size of the moon, the company originally said, and envisioned charging about 20-30 million dollars to whatever corporation might care to buy space.

Jhally: But since then, as our gaze has shifted downwards into our smartphones and tablets, corporations have turned their attention from outer-space, to cyberspace. Whatever it takes to get their brands in front of as many eyeballs as possible. Since the early 1990s, when commercial interests held control, the internet has become the primary delivery vehicles for corporate advertising. In fact, you could say it's the greatest mechanism for marketing commodities ever invented. There's never been anything like it to deliver eyeballs to corporations for their products.

Some commentators have remarked that Google and Facebook are not communications companies at all -- after all, they produce no content. They're actually the biggest advertising agencies in the world, selling our consciousness to corporations. They've only just started. Because so many non-media devices -- for example, cars, heating systems, buildings, coffee makers, washing machines, headphones, lamps -- are connected to the internet, people have been talking about a non-media network, an "internet of things." It's been estimated that there will soon be $26 billion connected devices, and companies like Google and Facebook are looking to use this network to put ads on literally everything and to ensure that there is an ad in front of us our entire waking lives.

[Fox News]

Reporter: Well, the ads, they're coming. Google, in a letter to the Securities and Exchange Commission, says it plans to put its ads on everything from your car dashboard to your wristwatch to your car refrigerator. You think we're joking? We're not.

[Fox Business]

Pundit: These companies like Facebook and Google and Amazon, they all want to basically control the internet of things so we can deliver advertising to any device.

Jhally: The overall effect of this commercial takeover of the culture, not surprisingly, is that we are drowning in a flood or ocean of commercial messages. There's just no escape from it. Simply put, in terms of sheer size and scale alone, there's never been a mass information campaign to match advertising in the history of the world. So, the question we need to address now is, what effect has it had on the culture and the society?

An Industry is Born

Jhally: When industrial capitalism came into its own in the late 19th and early 20th century, the effects were nothing short of revolutionary. Never before had the world seen the sheer quantity of commodities that industrial factories were now producing. In fact, one of the first economists who had tried to make sense of capitalism, Karl Marx, observed that what distinguished capitalism from all previous economic and social systems was its ability to produce what he called an "immense accumulation of commodities." But for capitalism to survive and grow as a system, production alone would not be enough. At its core, capitalism depends on commodities going through a three-part circuit of production, distribution, and consumption.

Production had been solved by labor and cost-saving advances in industrial technology -- easy access to raw materials and energy sources, and by hiring cheap, low-wage workers who didn't yet have any labor rights. Distribution had been solved by new modes of transportation that enabled factory owners to easily distribute their goods to buyers and retail outlets across great distances. All that remained was the problem of consumption: the challenge of making sure people bought things they didn't actually need.

The jeopardy to capitalism as a system was real. If consumption failed to keep pace with production and distribution, then capitalism as a system could collapse under the weight of overproduction. A casualty of too many goods chasing too few buyers. So, on pain of death, as a matter of pure survival, in the middle of the 19th century, capitalism invents an entirely new industry to save its health. It invents the advertising industry to bring supply and demand into greater synchronicity.

In the early years, into the 1900s, ads for consumer goods were more practical and informational than anything else. Department stores placed notices in newspapers and magazines listing the goods they carried. Businesses ran ads describing their products in great detail, offering long, text-based description of what a product actually did and how well it did it. But as time went on, and American capitalism continued to grow and produce an even greater accumulation of commodities, it quickly became clear that this informational approach to advertising wasn't enough -- that it had to move from a focus on people's existing needs to creating desires they didn't even know they had.

In a 1928 book called "American Prosperity," the Lehman brothers banker by the name of Paul Mazur explained this new approach: "Any community that lives on staples has relatively few wants. The community that can be trained to desire new things, even before the old had

been entirely consumed, yields a market to be measured more by desires than needs. Man's desires can be developed so that they will greatly overshadow his needs."

Mazur had hit on the central challenge facing capitalism in the modern era. That for capitalism to stay alive as a system and continue to grow, people would have to be trained to desire new things they didn't really need. As a response to this requirement, a new type of advertising emerged in the 1920s. Gone were the purely practical descriptions of what products actually did. Instead, ads started to be connected to another world of status and refinement, a world that a new, prosperous middle class could aspire to, could dream about.

Production would be given another boost in the wake of World War II, as American manufacturing made the transition from a wartime to a domestic economy, unleashing an unprecedented wave of new consumer goods for America's growing and increasingly prosperous middle class. As production accelerated, consumerism moved to the center of the American imagination like never before.

Marketing expert Victor Lebow, writing in the journal of retail in 1955, explained it this way: "Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing pace. We need for our people to eat, drink, dress, ride, live with more expensive consumption. It requires that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals; that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfactions, in consumption."

To accomplish this, the focus of advertisers shifts towards the emotional and social lives of Americans who gave themselves over to the consumerist mythology. Personal relationships became more important and visible, as did the inner psychic lives of consumers. The development of new research techniques helped advertisers identify what led behind human behavior and what motivated it, so that they could target their appeals more precisely.

[Archive video]

Video narrator*:* This is the institute for motivational research, a place devoted to the intriguing business of finding out why people behave as they do, why they buy as they do, why they respond to advertising as they do.

Jhally: Rather than hunches, the new method was based on observation of focus groups of consumers. What the research has discovered was that people often turned to commodities for emotional reasons, not rational ones, and that advertisers needed to tap into people's unconscious desire for happiness and pleasure. Advertising during this period would come to reflect this belief that images of individual happiness, self-fulfillment and well-being, were the key to selling people consumer goods. No matter what product was being pitched, consumer goods seemed capable of magically delivering instant pleasure, fulfillment and contentment. The stage had been set for the stories of advertising that surround us everywhere in our amped-up consumer culture today.

The Magic System

Jhally: Most discussions about the impact of advertising tend to focus on the effectiveness of ad campaigns for specific products. We see a Pepsi ad and we ask, "Does this ad make us want to buy Pepsi?" Well, if you're Pepsi or another Corporation trying to figure out how to sell specific products, that's an interesting question. But if you're interested in the social power of advertising, not simply its marketing function, that question is going to get you nowhere. To get at the social power of advertising, we need to look at the kinds of stories advertising tells as a whole.

["Mad Men"]

Don Draper*:* Advertising is based on one thing. Happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of the road that screams with reassurance that whatever you're doing is okay. You are okay.

Jhally: Every society has to have a story about happiness, about how to achieve human satisfaction, and the dominant story advertising tells us today is that the way to happiness and satisfaction is through the consumption of objects. Commodities will make us happy and help us enjoy life. In one sense, that's what every single ad tells us. Consumer products help us get the boy or girl. They make dinner with friends special. They bring families together. They are connected to intimate and exciting and romantic moments in our lives. In some cases, they're even more attractive to us than the real people we're with.

[Chrysler ad]

Jhally: Even in times of great stress, we're told that shopping and consumption is the answer. After the 9/11 attacks, then President Bush actually told America to keep shopping.

[Archive video]

President George W. Bush: And I encourage you all to go shopping more.

Jhally: Across our entire culture, the message is the same: Happiness and satisfaction can be achieved through consumption. In fact, the more products the better. The problem, of course, is that there's never been a shred of evidence to support this claim. In fact, there's a wealth of research that says exactly the opposite. The more people hold materialistic values -- that is, the more they identify themselves through the things they own or want to own -- the more miserable, the more depressed and the more ill they tend to be. And this isn't surprising once you look at the long-term research on happiness.

Since 1945, researchers have been conducting so-called "happiness" surveys to find out how happy the people in a society actually are. What these surveys have discovered over the years is striking. They found that the number of people who report being happy has remained makeable stable over time, virtually unaffected by our society growing richer and the fact that people have far more access to commodities and enjoy a much-higher standard of living

than past generations. The survey data is clear: We may have access to much more wealth, and much more stuff, but we are no happier as a society.

Now, why is this? Well, once again, we don't have to speculate. There's another set of important surveys called the “quality of life” surveys that have asked people what is most important to them and what they want out of life. Overwhelmingly, people have given non-material answers. In general, they haven't said they want a big house or a BMW or jewelry or an endless supply of sneakers. Instead, people have consistently said they want a certain level of autonomy and control over their lives. They want to feel good about themselves. They want to be valued for who they are as people. They want warm family relationships. They want leisure time that's free of tension and stress. They want romance and love. They want warm and close friendships. In other words, when asked what they want out of life, people overwhelmingly reply with the social elements of life.

This doesn't mean the material values aren't important -- of course they are. If you're living in poverty with little means of material support, if you don't know where your next meal is coming from and daily life is precarious, then you're not going to be happy. But what we know, again, from lots of survey data is that, above a certain level of poverty and comfort, acquiring more material things does nothing to make us any happier or even healthier. The research shows that happiness is the lowest among the very poorest companies, and as per capita GDP rises, the level of happiness does also rise. But once it gets to about $10,000 per capita, then increases in wealth start to make less difference in subjective happiness. And above $20,000 it's even less. In fact, in those societies where the marketplace is dominant, it seems to reach what researchers call a "bliss point" at about $33,000. After which, it essentially flattens out and even falls a little.

That's one of the great ironies of our current situation -- the market is good at providing those things that can be bought and sold and it pushes us, via advertising, in that direction. But the real sources of happiness, social relationships, are outside the capability of the marketplace to provide. The marketplace cannot provide love, it cannot provide real friendships, it cannot provide sociability. It can provide other material things and services, but they are not what makes us happy. No wonder, then, that advertising is so attractive to us, so powerful, so seductive. Because what it offers us are the images of the real sources of human happiness -- deep and meaningful social relationships that we yearn for. A family life that's rich with love and connection, romance and sexuality that centers on pleasure and eroticism, friendship that's about fun and sociability. That's why advertising is so powerful, that's what's real about it in one sense. The cruel illusion of advertising, however, is in the way it links those things to a marketplace that, by definition, cannot provide them in anything but the most fleeting ways. The falsity of advertising is not in the appeals it makes, which are very real, but in the answers, it provides.

Ad executive Jerry Goodis puts it this way: "Advertising doesn't mirror how people are acting, but how they're dreaming.” It taps into our emotions and presents them back to us connected to the world of things. That is a very powerful process. In this way, advertising is actually sort of like a fantasy factory -- taking our very real desire for human social contact and reconceiving it and re-conceptualizing, and reconnecting it with the world of

commodities. That's why Raymond Williams, one of the first people to look at advertising seriously, called it the "Magic System," a highly organized and professional structure that transforms mundane commodities into glamorous signifiers of people's desires. So, our very real and natural desire for sexual and romantic relationships can be linked to an object, like a pair of jeans. Or our longing for a meaningful connection with our family, our neighbors and community, all participating in a backyard BBQ, can come to be defined through a hamburger. That's what Williams means by a "Magic System." The great irony is that, as it does this, it draws us further away from what truly satisfies us -- meaningful human contact and relationships -- to what doesn't: things. In that sense, advertising reduces our capacity to become happy by pushing us, cajoling us, to carry on in the direction of things.

In his book, "The Joyless Economy," the economist Tibor Scitovsky compares the experience of consumers to that of drug addicts. He says that what gives human beings pleasure, what gives an immediate high, is novelty. The thrill of the new leads to changes in our levels of stimulation. A high that makes us happy. This is true of shopping -- our dopamine levels spike.

[Fox News]

***Man**:* I mean, yeah, my endorphins rage when I shop.

***Doctor**:* You get that bargain, dopamine is released and dopamine says, "Oooh, that was good. Let's do it again."

Jhally: But, by definition, the new can only last for a fleeting moment, which is why our dumps are full of perfectly functional things, or why we give away clothes only worn a few times to charity. Once the high is gone, so is the value of the product. Like the drug addict, we've gotten used to the high. It's become normal. If we no longer had it, it would cause us pain, so we need to keep shopping -- not to be happy, but to not be miserable. Advertising's role within this is analogous to the pusher on the street corner. As we try and break our addiction to things, it's there, constantly offering us another hit, telling us how good our bodies will feel if we just give ourselves over to products; persuading us of the sensuous experience that awaits us if we only choose the right food; convincing us that having the right commodity will open up a secret world of fun and pleasure.

[Diet Coke ad]

Jhally: By persistently pushing us towards products as vehicles for fulfillment, advertising is part of what we can call the "propaganda of commodities." The constant bombardment of the story into the psyches of the population has an obvious consequence -- not surprisingly, we want more and more things even though we can't afford them.

[Fiat ad]

***Ad narrator**:* The Fiat 500. You'll never forget the first time you see one.

Jhally: The result has been an explosion of credit card debt. Since the 1950's, the level of personal debt in the U.S. has skyrocketed. The American people collectively now owe more than a trillion dollars in credit card debt, and another trillion dollars in car loans. Over this same period, millions of families have been forced to add a second earner to try and make ends meet and survive, and the number of hours they work has sharply increased as well with the American people are now working longer hours than any other industrialized nation in the world by far. But despite all their efforts, most Americans now live paycheck to paycheck. Seven in ten Americans now have less than $1,000 in savings and a staggering 66 million Americans have absolutely no money at all saved for an emergency expense.

The personal toll of all these trends has been devastating. Americans are reporting rising levels of chronic stress, anxiety and fatigue. The American Psychological Association has found a direct link between financial stress and a sharp increase in depression and a host of other psychological and physical problems. Studies have also identified rising levels of loneliness in the age of mass consumer capitalism with more and more people expressing feelings of isolation and alienation and finding that when they turn to shopping for relief, they only feel more unhappy. Again and again, research has shown that the more invested we are in the materialistic values pushed by mass consumerism, the more unhappy we are.

This is exactly the opposite of the fundamental message advertising bombards us with -- a message that not only says buying things will make us happier and more satisfied, but that buying more and more things will make us more and more happy and satisfied boundlessly into the future. At the same time, there's a turning inward, so we increasingly mistrust other people, and we care less about the communities we're part of. If we look at what the commercial culture emphasizes, this loosening of the bonds between the individual and the community should not surprise us, because what it reflects is how it speaks to us. Indeed, that's precisely how advertising talks to us. It addresses us not as members of a society talking about collective issues, but as individuals. It talks about our individual needs and desires. It doesn't talk about those things we have to negotiate collectively such as poverty or healthcare, things like housing and the homeless, things like the degradation of the environment or how we deal with climate change. The market appeals to the worst in us -- greed, selfishness -- and discourages what is the best about us -- compassion, caring and generosity.

This idea that individuals and the market are better-situated to deal with whatever besets us is reflected in the realm of politics by the general disillusionment with government, the main collective institution we have at our disposal, and the triumph of what has been called "neoliberalism," which reflects the belief that the private marketplace should not be hindered by public regulation.

[Archive video]

President Ronald Reagan*:* In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem.

Jhally: If advertising is the cultural expression of the market system, then neoliberalism and politicians like Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and Donald Trump are its political expression. In fact, ex-British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, an early exponent of neoliberal ideology once actually said, "There is no such thing as society. There are just individuals and their families." According to Mrs. Thatcher, there is nothing solid we can call society -- no group values, no collective interests. Society is just a bunch of individuals acting on their own private and greedy desires. Unfortunately, we're now in a situation, both globally and domestically, where the marketplace cannot solve the problems that face humanity. The marketplace cannot deal with the threat of nuclear extermination that is still with us in the post-Cold War age. It cannot deal with the disaster of climate change, the effects of which are increasingly apparent to anyone who is paying the slightest attention.

But advertising, the main voice of the marketplace systematically pushes discussion of these issues to the peripheries of the culture. It stops us thinking about them in any serious way and talks in powerful ways instead of individual desire, individual fantasy, individual pleasure. Its essential message is, "Don't worry about society and the world, just party."

All That is Solid…

Jhally: When Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote The Communist Manifesto in 1848, they saw capitalism as a potentially positive step in human history -- a revolutionary society capable of wiping away the vestiges of a barbaric and brutal feudalism, and shattering old structures of authoritarian control. In fact, Marx and Engels coined the famous phrase, "All that is solid melts into air," to describe capitalism's dynamism and energy. They couldn't have known just how prescient they would be -- that capitalism would not just wipe away feudalism but would alter the very physical makeup of the world itself. The creation of the modern urban landscape is one testimony of that achievement, as is the spread of mass consumption, especially car usage, which has resulted in cities across the globe being suffocated by exhaust fumes. The situation is guaranteed to get only worse as consumerism as an ideology spreads across the globe.

But it's not just the direct results of consumption that we have to deal with, it's capitalism's rapacious plundering of more and more of the Earth's resources that's leading to the irreversible damage of the very fabric of the Earth. From strip-mining, where mountaintops are removed entirely, blown up, to extract coal, to the acres of forestland that are being clear-cut, scarring the landscape and radically disrupting the ecosystem, there's no limit to capitalism's revolutionary impulse to suck the life out of the planet. There's no more dramatic example of capitalism's capacity for destruction than the example of how it's treated the oceans. As a result of industrial trolling practices, where the floor of the oceans is plowed by huge nets hundreds of yards wide, there's the real possibility that, by midcentury, most of the fish in the sea will have disappeared. They'll be gone because we've hunted them and eaten them at a scale never before even imagined.

It's not just the bounty of the oceans we've gobbled up. Since 1950, the world's population has used up more of the Earth's resources than all previous generations combined,

consuming more raw materials in just 50 years than humans did in the previous 3,000 years. The problem is that these are non-renewable resources. More oil does not grow to replace what is taken out of the ground -- there's a finite amount of it. In fact, the pace of resource extraction is like a bell curve. It's gone up over the last century or so, as industrial societies have grown and amped up production on a scale unprecedented in human history. But as they push the limits of what the planet can bear, at some point these extraction rates will peak and plateau before starting to go down as the world's resources start to dry up. Infinite growth, by definition, requires infinite resources to sustain it. The Earth does not have infinite resources. In its wake, this indiscriminate plunder will leave a wasteland of empty sites that look like a scene from a futuristic, dystopian science fiction movie, and what's left of the resource will get much, much harder to extract. The age of what the industry calls "easy oil," where it's near the surface and relatively straightforward to mine, is over.

Look at the Athabasca Tar Sands Project in Alberta, which has to extract oil from bitumen. It has to be gouged out of the Earth, and it also takes huge amounts of water, which are drawn from the Athabasca River. So, we have oil at the end of this process, but it uses up enormous amounts of energy and creates tremendous amounts of toxic waste that leaks into the ground and into the river, and poisons people living downstream. The Alberta Tar Sands is the biggest mining project in the world, but it's just the tip of the iceberg and all the problems associated with it are multiplied 1,000 times over around the globe. In the lifetime of people alive today, we will have exhausted the planet and left it unrecognizable as we scour every last place for the resources necessary to fuel industrial production.

And it's not just a matter of the damage connected to the extraction of these fossil fuels. It's how they're then used in an expanding system of industrial production, which releases ever more dangerous levels of CO2 into the atmosphere, accelerating the greenhouse effect and making the Earth warmer and the climate increasingly volatile.

Scientists say the evidence is now simply overwhelming. Since the start of the Industrial Revolution, the average temperature of the Earth's surface has been steadily climbing. So much so, that every one of the ten hottest years in recorded history has occurred since 1998. It's not just environmental activists and climate scientists who've been sounding the alarm about all these dangerous trends. The United States military has been confronting the reality of climate change head-on as well. In one of the latest Quadrennial Defense Reviews, the Pentagon states explicitly that climate change poses a significant challenge for the United States and the world, saying that, as greenhouse gas emissions increase, sea levels are rising and average global temperatures are increasing and severe weather patterns are accelerating. In concluding that with these effects of climate change our threat multiplies that would aggravate stressors abroad, such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability and social tensions -- conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence. The evidence is now so clear that human behavior is what's driving all these destructive impacts, that in 2000, the Dutch scientist Paul Crutzen proposed that we are now living in an entirely new geological epoch, the age of man, or what he called "the Anthropocene."

Since then, many others have agreed that the changes unleashed by an unbridled consumer capitalism on the planet are so profound and transformative that we are in a unique geological period, deserving of its own designation. They've also pointed out that "the Anthropocene" is dangerous, not just to the planet, but to the other species as well. The history of the world has been marked by a number of periods of mass extinction of species, where dramatic changes in nature caused mass die-offs. Scientists have identified five. The most well-known is the dying off of the dinosaurs about 64 million years ago. Some commentators, looking at the available evidence, have postulated that we are currently in the sixth mass extinction, or what a recent study called "biological annihilation," and this one is a result not of changes in nature, but what human beings have done to destroy habitats and change the climate.

But as Bill McKibben reminds us, it's not all humans who have been responsible for this incredible damage to the Earth and to other species. The responsibility lies with the populations of the advanced consumer societies, us. He says, "Man's efforts, even at their mightiest, were once tiny compared with the size of the planet. The Roman Empire meant nothing to the Arctic or the Amazon, but now the way of life of one part of the world in one half-century is altering every inch and every hour of the globe. We've done this ourselves by driving our cars, building our factories, cutting down our forests, turning on our air conditioners. In the years since the Civil War, and mostly since World War II, we have changed our very atmosphere." When Marx and Engels wrote, "All that is solid melts into air," they couldn't have known that capitalism would one day literally melt the solids of the planet into air, or that all that melting ice would eventually lead to dramatic increases in sea levels, rendering coastal regions vulnerable to powerful storm surges caused by a growing chain of extreme weather events -- from monster hurricanes that have plunged entire cities and towns underwater, to tornado outbreaks that seem to grow more frequent and extreme year by year.

The link between these events and long-term climate change is now absolutely undeniable, as is the link to our use of fossil fuels like oil. The problem is that we as a society are addicted to our existing lifestyle and the fossil fuels that sustain it. Even our political leaders recognize this.

[Archive video]

President George W. Bush*:* America is addicted to oil, which is often imported from unstable parts of the world.

Jhally: Imagine an out-of-control addict, who has access to the largest military force ever assembled. What will that addict do to satisfy their habit? We don't need to speculate. We just need to look at the history. They'll make alliances with the most authoritarian and the cruelest people on the planet, people like the Saudi Arabian royal family, who happen to sit on one of the largest supplies of oil in the world. This isn't something recent. Since the end of World War II, every American president, Democrat and Republican alike, has pledged allegiance to these brutal monsters. It doesn't matter that they're an autocratic monarchy

that would be at home in medieval times, or that they funded and supported the rise of ISIS, because they have the drug we need.

For the last 70 years, the basis of American foreign policy has been insuring access to oil. That was the reason for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the people who paid the price, often with their lives, were those caught in the middle -- the innocent civilians unlucky enough to live where the major energy sources are. Rather than finding ways to curb our consumption habits or break our reliance on fossil fuels, the U.S. opted for a war that lasted more than a decade, killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and has cost the United States over $2 trillion. In the process, destabilizing the entire Middle East and unleashing the extremist forces that gave the world ISIS.

And then imagine the recently addicted, like China and Russia, who also have access to large military forces being added to this scenario. The stage is set for a confrontation of the most frightening kind. Imagine what will happen as the supply of the drug gets scarcer and scarcer, and the desperation of the addicts even more extreme. Military confrontation is guaranteed. When there are nuclear weapons on both sides, the consequences will be catastrophic. It really does seem sometimes as though we are living at the edge of the apocalypse, that everything -- socially, politically, militarily, physically -- is coming apart.

To get out of this situation will require us to think clearly and rationally. There's a formidable alliance of military officials, scientists, environmental activists and concerned citizens across the globe who have been pleading with us to start thinking about the long-term health of the planet and our children. No matter how much they've tried to raise awareness of these issues, the voices of these people have been no match for the much more powerful voice of consumer capitalism, which speaks to us through the multi-billion-dollar megaphone of the advertising industry, telling us loudly and constantly, from virtually every available space in the culture, that we should keep the carnival of consumption going without any concern. "Don't worry," this endless parade of ads tell us, "just party."

The corporations that dominate the marketplace thrive in the here and now. Their success measured in quarterly reports, short-term profits, and their ability to advance their own immediate financial self-interest. Advertising normalizes this present-oriented mentality by targeting us with deeply emotional appeals designed to bypass thinking altogether.

[Tacoma ad]

Man*:* Wooo! Did you see that? Whoop! Whoop!

Man*:* Aw, no way!

Jhally: There's nothing left to chance here. Over the last few years, the ad industry has made a science of targeting our emotions with something called "neuro-marketing." Rather than asking people to explain what they think of certain ads in focus groups, neuro-marketers are actually hooking people up to electrodes and then looking inside their brains as they watch test-ads, and then measuring how these ads stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain in real time in order to get an unfiltered look into people's emotional responses to ad content.

As the competition to stand out and be noticed has gotten more cutthroat, these attempts to short-circuit people's rational thinking processes have only gotten more intense. Sexual appeals have long been a staple of advertising, but in recent years, some advertisers have taken it to a new level.

[Coco de Mer ad]

Text on screen: We can help you think about sex more.

Jhally: Although these images have emerged out of the fantasies of the mostly male directors and writers of commercials, because advertising has colonized everything, including our own fields of desire, they now seduce everyone -- men and women alike -- and they form the ground, the context within which, we have to think about deadly issues like resource depletion, war and climate change. They're the lens through which we have to think about the future. Our culture, dominated by advertising, simply does not provide us the tools to think in the long-term way that is required. Instead, in advertising, the time horizon is short. The dominant mode is the "here and now." Ads tell us, over and over again, that immediate pleasure should be our first priority.

[Jose Cuervo ad]

Woman: It's coming! It's coming!

Jhally: Even when we know that times are dire and civilization is collapsing around us, ads encourage a nihilistic view that prioritizes pleasure in the present.

[Jose Cuervo ad continues]

(music plays on jukebox and a woman joins a man dancing)

Jhally: The result of all this is a kind of collective suicide pact, where we've given up the idea of the future for a pleasure-filled present, a party until the end of the world.

[Jose Cuervo ad continues]

(the building explodes)

Song: It's now or never.

Jhally: The challenge we face in the midst of this onslaught of images and stories that tell us only to think about the now and ourselves is to somehow imagine another world, a sustainable world that's in-sync with our deeply human desire for connection and sociability.

Optimism of the Will

Jhally: The Italian socialist thinker Antonio Gramsci had a famous phrase to describe the process of politics, that it was "a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will." What

he meant by that was that we have to confront the world as it is, understand it in the most forceful way, using all of our intellectual tools to see clearly what we are up against. When we analyze the array of forces confronting us, we could be dismayed and distressed -- pessimistic. But if we are serious about wanting to change the world in a more humane direction, the "optimism of the will," then that depressing analysis is absolutely vital, as it shows us where the weaknesses are, where the fault lines are that we can press against, who our enemies are, as well as identifying our friends and allies. I think there are reasons for optimism of the will.

Firstly, more and more people aren't just sitting back and escaping into the consumer fantasy, but are taking to the streets. People like Bill McKibben are desperately trying to draw attention to the ongoing climate catastrophe and build a mass movement for social change.

[Archive video]

Bill McKibben*:* We learned one thing from Keystone and from all these other fights. It's that when we fight, we win!

Jhally: And he's not alone. We've seen massive mobilizations by people committed to reversing climate change to assure there's actually a livable planet for themselves and for future generations. Other activists, such as those with Greenpeace, are confronting the fossil fuel industry on the front lines and, in the process, putting their own lives at risk. This is just one part of a growing movement that's been pushing back against the anti-Democratic excesses of the system on multiple fronts. We've seen the Occupy Wall Street movement, for example, shine a light on the astonishing rates of economic inequality that plague the wealthiest consumer capitalist societies, exposing as pure mythology the neoliberal idea that economic growth automatically translates to prosperity and happiness for most people. Then we have a growing movement of artists and hackers that's been setting its sights squarely on the excesses and abuses of the ad industry itself. This self-described band of culture jammers are subverting and destructing ads by remaking logos, reworking product images and creating their own anti-ad appeals.

In the UK, a group has been using a tactic called "Brandalism," to transform the corporate billboards that have been colonizing more and more public space, refashioning them as anti-commercial and anti-consumerist street art.

[Brandalism video]

Activist*:* What is Brandalism? Brandalism is… Well, it's vandalism but against brands. If you watch TV, you read a newspaper or magazine, you know you're going to come across advertisements. You can flip them over. You can choose whether you engage them. But out here, who's asked who? tThere's been no referendums, there's no democratic control. These guys got money, so they put their messages up. So, we're just taking their messages out, really. Just to level the playing field a bit.

Jhally: All of these forms of progressive resistance, across these many fronts, remind us of something crucial. That there's nothing natural or inevitable about the political economic system as it now exists. The system was created by certain institutions with certain interests, at a certain moment in time, so it can just as well be transformed by people with different interests in mind. This rising awareness has forced corporations to increasingly use environmental themes in their own advertising, what's called "green advertising," to appeal to people whose consciousness around climate change in particular has been raised.

[General Electric ad]

***Ad narrator**:* Capturing the wind and putting it to good use. Wind energy from GE.

Jhally: Even oil companies are getting in on the act, hoping we won't notice the sheer hypocrisy. Or the bottled water industry, that sells itself as environmentally responsible and at one with nature…

[Fiji Water ad]

***Ad narrator**:* Bottled at the source, untouched by man. It's Earth's finest water.

Jhally: Even though it's stealing water from a region whose own population lacks access to clean water, and then burning huge amounts of energy to ship it halfway around the world in millions of plastic bottles that wreak havoc within the environment.

I'm also hopeful about the fact that advertising is forced to use images of desire and satisfaction from another, very different, vision of society. One that's the opposite of what neoliberal capitalism delivers through products and the market. A world of meaningful work, deep community life and friendship, a world where families are free of stress and can be families, a world of intimacy and love, a world of relaxation and fun. None of these things can be delivered by products. And what we have to do is disentangle them from their seeming connection with the market and capitalism, and connect them to another vision of society that can actually deliver them -- a world based on human values, rather than the pursuit of blind profit.

That's the great political challenge. How to connect our real desires to a truly human world, a world of connection and sociability that's sustainable, rather than the dead world of things. We need to remember one thing. The advertising industry and, more than ever, the public relations industry, wouldn't be spending all this money to maintain and push this elaborate corporate vision of the world if they weren't afraid people might otherwise come to see the world through a different lens, one that's more in tune with social values, rather than the hollow materialistic values of consumerism.

In reality, the entire consumer capitalist system, at least as it's now constructed, is like a house of cards -- built on a foundation of carefully crafted propaganda to make sure we stay emotionally invested in the system and on board with it. If we were to start thinking critically about capitalism and see that the system only works in the interests of a very small number of people on the planet, the whole consumer spectacle could come tumbling down. So, they

have to keep constantly persuading us with their propaganda to not see the reality of the situation. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered his famous farewell address to the nation in 1961, we tend to remember his startling warning to the country about the dangers posed by the growing influence of American militarism and the American military.

[Archive video]

President Dwight D. Eisenhower*:* In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.

Jhally: Fewer people recall that Eisenhower went on to issue a second warning to the American people about the growing spiritual and political threat posed by capitalism and mass consumerism.

[Archive video continues]

President Dwight D. Eisenhower*:* As we peer into society's future, we, you and I and our government, must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own needs and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent famine of tomorrow.

Jhally: He was pointing out how the needs of capitalism often exist in direct conflict with the needs of democratic societies, and he was directly challenging the American people to think critically around how the system build entirely around the need for short-term profits, might pose a grave threat to the well-being of future generations -- a year, two years, 10 years, 70 years down the road. That's the challenge he left us, and to meet it, we'll have to wake up from the dreams that advertising has seduced us with to develop more humane and practical collective solutions to the global crisis we're now facing. It's no exaggeration to say that not only the health of democratic societies, but the future habitability of the planet and our very survival of the species is at stake.

[END]