SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP:
The Crisis of Consumerism

[TRANSCRIPT]

NARRATOR: The world we move through now bears few traces of our industrial past. Everywhere we look we see signs of modern capitalism's most enduring legacy – an immense accumulation of commodities and objects and manufactured desires – things, and messages marketing things, now saturating every part of our culture, and shaping virtually every aspect of our everyday lives. So that in many ways, we're no longer defined by the work that we do, but by the objects we consume. Industrial society has morphed into the consumer society.

JULIET SCHOR: The typical middle to upper middle class household occupies more than 2,000 square feet of floor space, owns at least two cars, a couple of couches, numerous chairs, beds and tables, a washer and dryer, more than two televisions, a VCR, and has cable. The kitchen contains a conventional oven, a microwave, a frost-free refrigerator, a blender, a coffee maker, a teakettle, a food processor, and so many pots, pans, dishes, cups, glasses, storage containers, kitchen utensils, and pieces of flatware that they aren't even counted. Elsewhere in this house are a personal computer and a printer, telephones and answering machine, a calculator, a stereo or CD player, musical instruments, and many pieces of art. In addition to painting and reproductions, there are decorative items such as vases, plates, and statuettes, photographs in frames, and knick-knacks. In the bathroom are a hairdryer, a scale, perhaps an electric toothbrush or shaver, and cabinets overflowing with towels, shampoos, conditioners, face creams, and other cosmetics. The closets are stuffed with clothes and shoes of all types, dresses, suits, pants, shirts, sweaters, coats, hats, boots, sneakers, flats, pumps, walking shoes, patent leathers, and loafers. And don't forget the jewelry. In addition to watches, the diamond ring, and other high value items, there's usually a large collection of costume jewelry, bead necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, earrings, earrings. The family room is filled with books, videos, tapes, CDs, magazines, and more photos and knick-knacks. The floors are covered with rugs or carpet, and throughout the house there's scattered other pieces of furniture, accented perhaps with dried or silk flowers. Stored in the garage or basement is all the sports equipment, such as bicycles and skis, as well as luggages and totes, lawn and garden tools. In addition to all these durable products, households spend heavily on services such as childcare, movies, restaurants and bars, hotel stays, airplane trips, haircuts, massages, visits to Disneyworld, lawyer bills, insurance premiums, interest payments, and sometimes rental on the storage space where even more stuff resides. If you are a typical consumer, you did not always have so much. There was probably a time in your adult life when you could fit everything you owned into your car and drive off into the sunset. Now you need professionals to transport your possessions.

WOMAN ON STREET: If I find something that I really love, I've got to have it. If that's materialistic, yes.

MAN ON STREET: Americans are in fact too materialistic.

WOMAN ON STREET: Is that a joke question? Oh my god, it's disgusting!

WOMAN ON STREET: We're an extremely materialistic culture.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Now wait a minute, just a minute. What's wrong with this type of materialism?

DUANE ELGIN: I think many of us in our society, our consumer society, are so distracted, so alienated, so fragmented by the whole consumption process that we are not sure if we've actually been alive.

CECILE ANDREWS: Feeling alive in this country has come to be a counterfeit feeling and that we think that, when we buy something, we have an excitement and we think we're feeling alive.

ELI JAXON-BEAR: The problem is that the moment doesn't last because it's brought on by particular circumstances, so then you have to shop again or have sex again, or do whatever it is that brought on the blissful experience.

WOMAN SINGING IN ARCHIVAL FILM: I wish my living room were all redone.

CECILE ANDREWS: In most of human history, having more did make you happier. And that's not true anymore.

NARRATOR: On one level, the industrial revolution transformed the very nature of work – replacing the slow, deliberate age of craftsmanship with the planned frenzy of the factory.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Chains, inventions, power, black out the past, forget the quiet cities, bring in the steam and steel, the iron men, the giants, open the throttles faster and faster.

NARRATOR: But on another level, as the sheer speed and efficiency of the new age exploded into unprecedented levels of productivity, something more fundamental was in the process of being transformed – the very way people saw themselves and their place in the world. In the process, revolutionizing not only how much stuff we were able to produce for others but how much we were able to acquire for ourselves.

JULIET SCHOR: Right before the century turned, we had the roaring 90s, which were a period like the 1920s and the 1980s and 90s, which was a period of a lot of wealth being made, a lot of wealth being concentrated at the top, so the distribution got more and more unequal.

JAMES TWITCHELL: So in American culture, the first person who really looked carefully at over-the-top consumption was this wonderful curmudgeon, cantankerous character named Thorsten Veblen.

JULIET SCHOR: Thorsten Veblen wrote his classic theory, "The Leisure Class," and that was a partly satirical but very serious look at the growing roll of using products to convey social status and to create social superiority. Obviously took a dislike to ostentation and wealth, saw it as a violation of the type of values that he thought the country should be expressing.

JAMES TWITCHELL: And for the first time, he really laid out the importance of consumption as a way of defining self. That you would consume, as he said, conspicuously because you wanted somebody else to see exactly who you were. American culture does, after World War II, take a profound shift.

MAN AND WOMAN SINGING IN ARCHIVAL FILM: I wish I had a castle in the sky where we could watch the world go by, with silver from the moonlight and gold from the sun, in our own, just our own wishing castle in the sky.

JAMES TWITCHELL: As people who had always yearned to be part of the consumerist mentality were allowed in, and they were allowed in both because they had the disposable time and the disposable money. And also because the suppliers of objects – cars, refrigerators, all kinds of things that had been difficult to get to – now were streaming this stuff at ever cheaper prices into a eager community of consumers.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry. The world is so full of a number of things. And we don't want to miss any.

JULIET SCHOR: And so you had more and more people from the working class being incorporated into a middle class lifestyle, being able to own homes, move to the suburbs and so forth. The idea of keeping up with the Jones' arises in that context, and the ideas that the Jones' live in the house next door in the subdivision, and you're watching them as they accumulate Chevy, washing machine, television. Keeping up with the Jones' means trying to keep up with the rising standard of living, looking at people you know, people you live among, so it's a neighborhood-based model. I think the other important part about that model, in contrast to today, is that it was a model of face-to-face social interaction. People wanted things not because the advertisers told them they needed to have them, but because their neighbor had it, and they saw the Chevy drive into the driveway. People saw the new clothing, or the stuff for the kids, or whatever it was, and

they saw it and wanted it. And it was really a model of social comparison. In the 70s, you start to see things changing. A couple of big changes, one is the number of women going into the workforce, working for pay increases, particularly among married women, married with children. They shift out of that more egalitarian neighborhood context into corporations, which are very hierarchical, and so they're exposed to people of higher economic levels, their boss, their boss' boss, and so forth. And then the other key thing is that instead of a situation in which people all up and down the economic distribution are pretty much just looking to others who are like them, more and more people start to gaze toward the top, the so-called 'affluent lifestyle.' Now that happens for a couple of reasons. One is that those people are becoming very conspicuous in the way they're consuming. They're getting into the newspapers and the magazines. Some of the most famous examples of this start in the 1980s. Dallas and Dynasty: soap operas, which had always overrepresented the wealthy, come into primetime and are seen by many more people. This is the era where you have the show The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, which eventually morphs into MTV's Cribs and then Home and Garden TV. And as people watch more and more media, they're no longer seeing what's happening with their neighbors because they're increasingly – don't even know their neighbors. Or new kinds of houses got built where people drive right into the house when they come home, and they don't have to go outside. So the decline of social interaction at the neighborhood level becomes very important. And it's a process like what Veblen was talking about in the 1890s – really, really conspicuous consumption.

NARRATOR: Enter the age of modern advertising. Consumption may have been conspicuous, but appeals to our consumer desires would become even more so, giving rise to a glistening new world of images and messages and brands – a world of surface appeals targeted at deep human needs, by a new class of experts charged with awakening our inner urge to shop.

DR. ROD GORNEY: For those of us who have enough, we are no longer stimulated by our cravings and our scarcity to consume more. So now, in order to make us consume more, we are subjected to a lot of propaganda.

WOMAN ON STREET: Oh my God, everything is advertising!

ELI JAXON-BEAR: We are being run by our subconscious drives. And as long as we're being run by our subconscious drives, then those who are conscious of those drives can manipulate them and control them. And so then it's really just lining up the barnyard animals. And the farmers find that if you play soothing music the cows give better milk, so you get mall music everywhere.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: We have opened our doors to the devil!

CHRIS JORDAN: The machine of advertising and marketing, that has just become phenomenally sophisticated over the last 40 or 50 years, is in very large part running the whole consumer culture.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: On every billboard, radio and television, on every newspaper and magazine.

CHRIS JORDAN: And it's frightening because they've gotten so good at reaching in and finding what motivates the macho man – or the even beautiful woman but who wants to be more beautiful, or the uncomfortable teenager. They know how to go straight to our fears.

ARCHIVAL COMMERCIAL: Ladies and gentleman, this commercial is going to use subliminal advertising.

CHRIS JORDAN: In a very strange way, I think our society is being subjected to a kind of mind control.

ARCHIVAL COMMERCIAL: That means you will never see or hear the name of the product.

CHRIS JORDAN: It's very much to me like the move The Matrix.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Sales, they've got to go up!

CHRIS JORDAN: We have to step back out of the matrix and learn how to make choices for ourselves.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: You are powerless.

WOMAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: I'll show you how powerless I am.

WOMAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: My brain burns with it.

CECILE ANDREWS: They've switched. It used to be: if you buy this, then you'll be popular. And now it's: buy this, and you'll be happy.

TELEVISION COMMERCIAL: Make your holiday wishes come true.

CECILE ANDREWS: They're very, very clever – and particularly towards kids.

DUANE ELGIN: I think it's enormously unfair to take some of the best trained minds in cognitive psychology, to take some of the best trained technicians working with

computer animations and graphics, put those together into short segments of 30 seconds or so that tell people, “well, here's who you are, and here's what's important.”

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Let's not forget the young people.

JULIET SCHOR: In my last book, “Born to Buy,” I did a survey of kids. This is a group marketers call tweens. They're marketed to very, very intensely. What my survey found is that involvement in consumer culture undermines kids' wellbeing in a variety of ways – that the kids who are less exposed, those kids are better off, they're healthier, they have a better sense of self.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Give those kids something for their busy, little minds, I always say.

JULIET SCHOR: I used a statistical model that allows us to ask the question: “Is it poor parenting that leads to consumer involvement?” But what's interesting today is that the good parents and the bad parents have super consumer involved kids.

JOHN DE GRAAF: We're spending twenty times as much to target kids with advertising today as we were in 1980. This is paying off. And the tactics, which include trying to make the parents look like idiots and fuddy duddies, this sort of stuff to promote aggressive and rude behavior because it's cool and will sell a product. I've heard marketers say:

YOUTH MARKETER: Anti-social behavior in pursuit of a product is a good thing.

JOHN DE GRAAF: Sweden doesn't allow advertising to kids under twelve. Neither does the Province of Quebec, and neither should we.

JULIET SCHOR: If your children are growing up in a culture in which what everybody is doing is involving themselves in consumer culture, it's very difficult to isolate them from that.

DUANE ELGIN: I think Madison Avenue has an enormous amount of power in our lives. It's been said that: to control a society, you don't need to control its courts. You don't need to control its armies. All you need to do is control its stories and its television. And it’s Madison Avenue that's telling us most of the stories, most of the time, to most of the people.

CAROL HOLST: It's interesting. I think a number of folks – myself included – get to a certain point where it's really invisible. And I think, in a sense, because it's so all-pervasive, the advertisers have created that scenario themselves. They've bombarded us with messages to the point where we just don't listen anymore and honestly don't care. So I don't really have the anger around it, but I know some people do.

WOMAN IN PARK: 'Cause it's subliminal, right? You're like walking around, and there's all sorts of posters and banners and stuff that you don't even recognize, you don't even see.

MAN ON DOCK: We just bought a car, and I believe that the advertising was a big part of that.

TELEVISION COMMERCIAL: I've got some big news!

DUANE ELGIN: The average person sees about 25,000 commercials on television a year. And every commercial is not simply a pitch for a product. It's a pitch for a set of values and attitude towards life.

JAMES TWITCHELL: If you realize that the human being is hardwired to respond emotionally to stories, you can now understand why applying stories to things is so important. So if you have a widget that comes out of a widget machine, and here's another widget from another widget machine, if I can tell you a story about this one, that separates this one from that one, I can actually get you to feel differently. And feeling is what we're after. Very often luxury objects are objects that are only separated because of the way they're able to make us feel. “Oh, now I've got it!” Got what? Got overpriced water? Got an overpriced car? You put the logic machine on top of it, it makes no sense. But you put the emotional machine next to it, you can see what's happening.

DR. PETER WHYBROW: Human beings are very unusual in that they have a large enough brain and a capacity to be able to see beyond the immediate instinctual striving, which is what drives most animals. The part of the brain that grew is our frontal lobes, which are the intelligent, rational part of the brain. So on the one hand, we're instinctually driven, but on the other side, we have this incredible intelligence, which allows us to either harness the instinctual stuff or to be harnessed by it. From a neuroscience standpoint, this is predicated upon the very well worked out and understood process by which the brain pays attention to the environment. And it's called the rewards system. And it's driven by a set of chemistries, which are called the dopamine chemistries. There are many ways in which this rewards system can be hijacked. The most obvious are things like cocaine, amphetamines, caffeine.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: I like coffee.

DR. PETER WHYBROW: But these systems, once they are hijacked, they essentially take over all the rational part of thinking. They're very valuable in keeping us safe and telling us what's good and bad in the world, but the danger is that they caught up in the rewards cycle, which is meaningless. I like ice cream. I like potato chips. But I know that if I were to eat ice cream and potato chips all day long, I would probably turn out to be weighing 250 pounds, which probably would not be good for me. It used to be restricted

because there was no ice cream, and there were no potato chips. But now in our affluent society, we have all these things. We have to consciously say to ourselves: "How much of this do I need?" More of this is not enough. You need something beyond ice cream and chips. So it's complicated, but it's not difficult to understand. It's a balance between rational behavior and instinctual behavior. The instinctual behavior is what drives the reward system, and the rational behavior is what makes you human.

JULIET SCHOR: Let's just think about the context in which we're living.

DR. PETER WHYBROW: We are continuously looking for new things.

JULIET SCHOR: So that the consumer market place never stays still, and, in fact, things are accelerating.

DR. PETER WHYBROW: So everybody wants a new cell phone, even though the old one's working perfectly. You want one with a flip-up top, or the one that's silver or red, or has more buttons on it.

WOMAN ON STREET: Everything has to be stainless steel. I can't live without anything stainless steel.

WOMAN ON STREET: And I got all kinds of play toys.

MAN ON STREET: I like to walk through big super centers just as like a test of will, you know? I'll go down, and I'll just be like: "oh, that looks delicious! No!"

WOMAN ON STREET: Coffee maker, espresso machine.

WOMAN ON STREET: And I've got a Bentley and a Lante, and it's red.

WOMAN ON STREET: My one thing is: I like coach purses.

WOMAN ON STREET: Perfume. You can't have sexy clothes without perfume. Jewelry.

JULIET SCHOR: Okay. That would be fine, in some ways, if it were sustainable in a financial sense or in an ecological sense. 'Cause the system is always moving, your identity with any one set of products is always changing. But the basic rationale behind wanting the stuff is very fundamentally rooted in deep social dynamics around inequality, competition, social esteem and so forth. Because our system says that you gain esteem through what you have and how you show it.
Consumption is about social communication and social connection. The problem isn't that consumption is social. That's a good thing. The problem is that we are socially communicating and connecting in very perverse and dysfunctional ways.

NARRATOR: The rise of consumer society has long raised serious concerns about declines in democratic participation and citizenship. Whatever the virtues of consumption, they have not always sat well with the basic demand in democratic societies for people who know what's going on in the world and aren't afraid to participate in it.

CECILE ANDREWS: John Dewey on his 90th birthday said: "Democracy is born in conversation." And it's talking to each other about it and getting a chance to think. If we have this lifestyle that has no time, that's filled up with advertising all the time, or working long hours, or driving in your car. We have to run around to do things. We can't walk. We can't ride a bike.

DR. PETER WHYBROW: The barriers that have now allowed us to essentially work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week have been removed. Time is no longer an issue. Space is no longer an issue. Distance is no longer an issue. We can just work all the time. What you find is that there's a rising level of anxiety in the country because everybody's continuously competing – worrying that somehow somebody's going to get ahead of them.

JULIET SCHOR: With that shift, that vertical emulation process, where now everybody wants to live like the upper middle class and the wealthy. That's happening at a time when people's actual ability to do that financially is eroding – as wages have stagnated, as families have to add another earner to the labor force in order just to keep up. What do they do? Well, they borrow more, they work more hours, they run down their savings.

DR. PETER WHYBROW: All that makes people very anxious because they're constantly on their toes. The human body wasn't designed for that. The human body was designed for acute emergencies. But when the acute emergency is continuous, when the alarm bells are ringing all the time, it never relaxes. And the results of that are people get all sorts of stress diseases. Anxiety is just the beginning. Depression – they get depression because they feel they can't cope. They get other somatic diseases like hypertension, cardiovascular disease. So one of the most obvious results of this fast-paced world is that we tend to reduce the time we spend in social interaction around very important functions, such as eating, for example, and we spend much less time eating around a table than we do driving around in a car together.

KID IN ARCHIVAL FILM: But Mom!

MOM IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Look, I don't want to hear another word out of you, Bobby, Billy, Benny. What the hell's the kid's name?

JOHN DE GRAAF: In our families, even our pets are affected by this. You know, not too along ago, there was a story in the Marin County newspaper that said that the fastest

growing business in Marin was professional dog walkers. Even a dog's life isn't what it used to be.

DUANE ELGIN: I think Lily Tomlin described it well when she said: “The problem with the rat race is that, even if you win, you're still a rat.” And people are feeling themselves as a part of that busyness and they want to de-clutter their lives. They want to simplify their lives so they have more time for that which really matters.

CECILE ANDREWS: I ask people when I go to speak to people at work places, and I say: “Do you feel some hope? Can you do something about your lack of time?” And they say: “No.” And I always think: How can this have happened? The most powerful country in the world, and its people feel powerless to change?”

DR. PETER WHYBROW: So the affluence drives us into sickness because we can't figure out what to do with it. We haven't spent enough time thinking about it. We've spent a lot of time thinking about how to survive – when there isn't much around to eat or when it's dangerous, etc. – but we haven't spent any time thinking about what to do with affluence.

DR. ROD GORNEY: How did we get into this problem that we're faced with now where life is becoming more and more complicated and where we are urgently in need of greater simplicity?

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Well, that sounds like a leading question, but let's have it.

DR. ROD GORNEY: The first cell, and all of the species in between that first cell and ourselves, were guided by a basic principle which you could call the basic law of life: cooperation.

WOMAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Where's all this competition we've heard so much about?

DR. ROD GORNEY: Competition was always a part of that evolution, but everywhere and always, competition was subordinate until relatively recently. Three million years ago, our earliest human relatives began to evolve on this planet. They survived mainly by taking care of each other, and they took care of each other not because they were saints, but because they were each other's only social security. Whether or not we admit this today, we survive as a species mainly because we are still the virtuoso caretakers of one another.

CECILE ANDREWS: And maybe that's the biggest way you feel alive is when you help each other. And you don't do that in a consumer society.

JULIAN DARLEY: A lot of the root of our consumption, and a lot of the root of many of our other problems – psychological problems and so forth, emotional problems, which we see all around us – those can be found in our tendency towards individualism. Once you start thinking of yourself as an individual, an awful lot of the glue that keeps us together, makes us feel part of something, starts to dissolve. It's worth pointing out that large quantities of money and energy drive that dissolution quicker than almost anything else. Because what happens is it gives you the ability to separate yourself from others.

ELI JAXON-BEAR: Whatever level of community we had from the 1940s and 50s has been destroyed. Television has been a big part of that.

DR. PETER WHYBROW: The old social structures are falling away, but they're essential to human learning. They are the, sort of, immune system – the crucible – of the next generation. And we're not spending any time thinking about how we replace them.

JULIAN DARLEY: Once you're an individual, that stresses this idea of being separated – kind of an entity. So that means you need a separate house, a separate car, separate cooking facilities: washing machine, dishwasher, fridge or fridges, bathing, cleaning. Everything you can imagine.

JOHN DE GRAAF: We're a victim of our myth – that myth that the road to the good life is the goods life. That the goody economy is the economy that always grows more and more and more and more. And we need to ask the question, first and foremost: What is an economy for? If an economy is just for being number one, and having the grossest domestic product at the expense of our health, our communities, our families, our environment, then that economy and $2.50 will buy me a short latte. We have gotta ask the question: Why are we so obsessed with producing and consuming stuff at the expense of every other value we claim to believe?

JULIAN DARLEY: Let me suggest that the economy is not the flow of money as would be popularly believed. It is actually the flow of energy and the flow of resources that goes along with that. So this system of economics, which we have developed, you could find a lot of words to describe it: crazy, devastating, and I'm afraid, ultimately suicidal.

NARRATOR: Beneath the surface spectacle of an apparently endless parade of goods and commodities lies a decidedly less infinite truth: that the cheap energy that modern industrial societies have been relying on for more than a century may not be able to keep pace with the sheer force of global economic growth.

ALAN GREENSPAN: I'm saying it is about oil, and that I believe it was necessary to get Saddam out of there.

JULIAN DARLEY: Oil was, at first, a replacement for whale oil – a species which, particularly the Atlantic whale, was being driven to extinction at a great rate of knots. In the early 1900s, in fact 1901, a great gusher was discovered in Texas called Spindletop. That is what really began to change the quantities of oil that were flowing. So when you have the idea of the automobile, which was coming on stream in a big way after 1900 – for traffic jams by 1910 and so forth in the U.S. – that really, kind of, sealed the fate of the world, along with the mini technological inventions that went along with it. And what it allowed us to do was transform transport. That's an obvious one. It allows us to go vast distances. And that's partly because the enormous energy contained in a liter, a gallon, a pint, a barrel, of oil – it's just absolutely stunning the amount that is in there. It's an equivalent to a month's work of a very strong man is contained in say a gallon of gasoline. It's no wonder that we can do so much of it. Once we got hold of this virtually unlimited, very cheap flowing energy source, we unlocked its potential to extraordinary and, I think, frankly disastrous results. It has totally transformed the planet. It has allowed an enormous population explosion. It has allowed us to flow into every nook and cranny of the planet and transform that, and that's putting it nicely. There are many, many other things we have done with oil. It's also transformed the way we do food.

DAVID ROOM: Essentially we are eating fossil fuels.

JULIAN DARLEY: Industrial agricultural, in the words of Al Bartlett, is the use of land to turn oil and gas into food. And that's really worth bearing in mind how much of our food depends on oil and gas. But then there's everything else. There's the varnishes and the paints and the plastics and the processed heap used for metals and glass and silicone, PV panels. It is just absolutely endless. And it is worth pointing out that there is a fundamental difference between coal and trees and other things – which every pound or every unit of energy that you want to get from coal or from trees or peat – you have to cut it down or dig it up. You have to move that number of molecules yourself. You have to put some effort into it, whereas, with oil and gas, they flow. And in the early stages, they literally flow out under vast pressure on their own. As that flow goes into decline, and it looks like it has begun to decline, we will find that there is an enormous difference between flowing energy and energy that you have to mine or melt or hack or process.

DAVID ROOM: When we're talking about global oil peak, we are specifically talking about supply. So demand is a whole different thing, and therein lies the problem because, if we look at how industrial civilization has grown, we can see that it scales up with the advent of oil and natural gas. And so, as we see the production of oil increase, we're also seeing the amount of GNP, we're seeing the population, we're seeing everything else scale up as well.

JAMES TWITCHELL: What do we do with the immutable, inescapable fact, that to get to this level, we are ravaging and pillaging the earth? It's an inconvenient truth, but it's a truth.

DUANE ELGIN: If we look at resources, right now we are consuming about 1.2 earths. And if everyone on this planet were to consume and live roughly at the level that we do in the United States, it would take 5 earths.

JAMES TWITCHELL: And all you have to do is stroll around the world and see, when people have a chance to get to this other world, how eagerly they do it.

DUANE ELGIN: And we're very rapidly moving in that direction.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Across the continent, the white men rolled. First on wheels of wood, then on wheels of steel. Hacking, ripping, and gouging as they went, building a great and mighty nation – and rearing their fabulous cities where once the tepees stood.

DUANE ELGIN: Now our technologies are so powerful – our impact upon the world is so great – that we're actually undoing the ecological foundations on which our future depends.

NARRATOR: Finding ways to meet such big challenges will obviously require big thinking by a lot of people. But the possibility of such a focused movement rising up to solve these problems will remain remote if people are unable – or unwilling – to recognize that there even is a problem in the first place.

CHRIS JORDAN: When you look around, it doesn't look like there is anything wrong.

DAVID ROOM: Actually, I call it the sunny day syndrome. You look outside and you see a beautiful sunny day.

CHRIS JORDAN: Water flows out of the tap nice and cleanly. There are plenty of mountains to go hiking in.

DAVID ROOM: There's no blackouts.

CHRIS JORDAN: The food at the supermarket is healthy and fairly uncontaminated.

DAVID ROOM: It is really hard for people to comprehend that there is actually a problem.

JULIAN DARLEY: We can see a certain number of miles on a clear day, but basically we use our eyes to look at the world from a few feet to a few yards or meters away. Where anywhere in evolution would any creature, including us, have had access to the means to be able to think about what would happen in 10 years or 10,000 miles away? We couldn't possibly think about that. I mean we didn't understand weather at all well. We didn't understand the stars. All we could do was observe, and that is what our brains are designed to deal with.

DUANE ELGIN: Currently, about 25% of all plant and animals species on the earth are threatened with extinction.

ELI JAXON-BEAR: We've been through 5 world extinctions, according to our scientists. Most of them are brought on by cataclysmic events out of the control of earth – from being hit by asteroids to volcanic explosions. Different things that wiped us out, that wiped out all the species. We are now in the first major extinction that was caused by one of the species. We are in the middle of an extinction that is faster than the dinosaurs died off. We've caused it.

DUANE ELGIN: Species – extincting them – has been compared to flying along in an airplane and popping rivets. And you decide, well a few rivets come out here, a few rivets come out there, but after a while, the whole plane flies apart. And that's what we're doing to the biosphere. We're unraveling the very fabric – the web of life itself is coming unraveled.

ELI JAXON-BEAR: Perhaps that releases a genetic signal that was once so successful, which is the ego. The ego was the brilliant survival machine. It brought us dominance of the earth. But now it's killing us. And perhaps now, as the ego went from being a huge medicine for survival to a huge poison of destruction, it sets off the next biochemical signal that it's time to wake up. It's time to evolve to the next level, and the shock to wake up is that we are killing our own earth. That kind of shock can wake up the whole of humanity.

JAMES TWITCHELL: This is something for people who study the other side of materialism – namely the wasted side, the garbage side, the destruction side.

CHRIS JORDAN: This is one of the first images that I made in this body of work. And one of the things that I found really interesting, when I made the large print of this image, was – people would come over to my house, and we would stand in front and look, and people would start pointing out things that they use. And I noticed the same thing. My wife and I would stand here and look and go: Oh my gosh. Look. Campbell Soup! Or Bush's Country-Style Baked Beans. We just had those a couple nights ago. And one of the things that hit me was the fact that – that this isn't somebody else's garbage. And in fact, that can of Bush's Country-Style Baked Beans might be the very can that we used. It is interesting and frightening to think about the concept that each of our own individual consumptive practice is so small in the grand scale that it doesn't matter. What the heck is one more SUV when they sold 3.6 million of them in the United States last year? And any one person can justify all of their consumptive practices based on that. And yet it is also true that the aggregate combined effect of all of our consumptive behavior is totally trashing the earth. You can stand back from it and look at huge, sort of, aggregate numbers like the amount of oil we use or the amount of global warming that is happening. Or you can, sort of like a satellite photograph, you

can zoom further and further and further in and just look at one product among the thousands of products that we use, like cell phones. And if you just look at the environmental footprint of cell phones and all the things that go into them, the amount of waste in cell phones. Just that is staggeringly enormous and complex, and then you zoom back a little bit further and you realize there are all of these products that those kind of figures apply to. And then you zoom back even further and think about the infrastructure of our consumers and all the trucks that are on the roads, all the trains that are carrying stuff, and the planes that are flying back and forth, and the oil fields that are sucking the oil out of the ground. And if you get all the way back, you can't see the details any more. One of the things I refer to, when I talk about my work, is this observation that that the apocalypse is in progress. When I walk around and look at these vast piles of garbage that I find, it looks to me like apocalyptic. The concept of the apocalypse is something that is supposed to happen fast and spectacularly and dramatically, but it seems to me that the apocalypse is actually happening, and it is us that is making it happen, and it is just increment by increment by increment. What we are doing to our planet, and to our individual spirits, is something that I think can kill the joy and like all the reasons that people want to be alive. The issue is so huge, and the scale is so staggering, and American behavior is so phenomenally out of bounds in so many ways, that it's impossible to even comprehend. Being unable to comprehend it is an easy way to justify keeping right on going the way we are. I think if you ask almost anybody, are you living a life doing what you know is the right thing? I think the vast majority of people, if they looked hard at it, they would have to admit they aren't. But somehow the cost to them, of knowing that they're doing something that is not okay with them, they can bear that. It is worth it to have a bitchin' car. And it is worth it to have a really nice new set of rosewood speaker cabinets. And so we all walk around with this little bit of a bad feeling, without knowing what it would be like to live a life where you don't have that bad feeling, where your conscience is in here with you.

NARRATOR: With matters of conscience come matters of fact and responsibility. And it is a fact now too obvious to ignore that what we are doing to maintain our lifestyles here is bound to have repercussions elsewhere. Not everyone benefits equally from what the system offers, and not everyone pays the same price, creating the potential for conflict and backlash.

DR. ROD GORNEY: I think the biggest threat we face as a species is the gap between how urgent it is that we learn to change our values and predominantly take care of each other and the enormous rage and revenge that people around the world are seeking for the fact that they are mostly exploited.

MAN ON STREET: Violence is going to increase because more people are going to have less. So basically right now, everybody better get what they can in order to set up some sort of stable future for their offspring.

DUANE ELGIN: That brings me to another warning to humanity, and this came from a hundred Nobel Prize winners. And they said: "the most profound danger to world peace in coming years will not stand from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the worlds dispossessed."

JULIAN DARLEY: Once you corral all the resources, it necessarily weakens those other people over there, and it means you can dominate them and control them and thus bring evermore resources your way, and we have many techniques of doing this, including the modern methods of trade, which to me at many times look like very little other than a clever legalized form of piracy. We've drawn up the rules and said this is an okay way of doing it. So all of this basically comes down to the fact that if you concentrate resources in one place, and take them from another place, that increases polarization. That means that some people are doing without, and other people are doing with very much. And there you have at least one of the roots of a fairly profound form of economic injustice.

ELI JAXON-BEAR: It really is going to take a humbling of our psyche as Americans to realize the horror that has been done, with our dollars and in our name, so that we could buy cheap stuff.

DUANE ELGIN: We live in a living system, and as a biological living organism itself, there's going to be forever, I think, a tension between how resources are allocated. So the first step towards our maturity as a human family is to recognize this tension and this requirement to consciously learn how to live sustainably on the earth. The situation is so complex that no government I feel can figure it out and come up with a plan in time to solve our situation. And so it is going to require self-directing individuals at the local scale to take charge of there lives and pull their lives back from these parental institutions of business and government and say, I'm going to handle this myself.

JULIAN DARLEY: If you ask the question of responsibility, it almost immediately plugs you right back into the wider problematic, if you like, which for some people might be daunting, but I hope that it could also be seen as rather exciting. And we've got these quite powerful brains. They're quite good at doing these kinds of tasks, but we have to practice doing it.

DR. ROD GORNEY: I remember seeing a photograph of an ocean liner during the war against the Nazi's, which had been torpedoed and was sinking. And people were asked to come down the gangplank, into the water where lifeboats were waiting to pick them up. And I saw a couple of guys, and I was told that these were immigrants who had hoped to come to the new world, carrying two suitcases, each stuffed with jewelry and watches, which was the way they hoped they could fund the beginning of their new life. They walked down the gangplank, right into the water, and went to the bottom. In many respects, that is what is happening to us today.

DUANE ELGIN: It's incumbent upon all of us, I think, to take that look in the mirror – to see what we're doing with our own unique lives. And to look at the food that we eat, the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive, the home in which we live, the work which we do, and so on and make choices which will collectively move us towards a more sustainable, compassionate, and wonderful future.

[END]