

## READING THE SIGNS

1. In your journal, explore what items count as status symbols in your own circle of friends (these do not need to be the sort of high-end items that Roberts mentions but could be particular brands of jeans, handbags, shoes, or electronic devices). What appeal do these items have for you? Does acquiring them make you happy? If so, how long does that feeling last? If not, why not?
2. **CONNECTING TEXTS** Roberts assumes that the treadmill of consumption is irreversible, that we will inevitably “continue to embrace the shiny-objects ethos” (para. 8). Discuss this assumption in class. If you agree, what evidence can you advance to support Roberts’s claim? If you do not, what economic or social evidence can you find to refute his belief? Use the class discussion as a springboard for your own essay on this topic. To develop your ideas, you might consult Laurence Shames’s “The More Factor” (p. 80) and Steve McKevitt’s “Everything Now” (p. 143).
3. In what ways does television, especially reality TV programming, encourage the shiny-objects ethos? Select one show, such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, and analyze the way in which it stimulates the desire to buy products that convey prestige and status.

## PHYLLIS M. JAPP AND DEBRA K. JAPP

***Purification through Simplification: Nature, the Good Life, and Consumer Culture***

One of the greatest paradoxes of American culture is its simultaneous devotion to rampant consumerism and its celebration of rural simplicity as the ideal model for “the good life.” And as Phyllis M. Japp and Debra K. Japp argue in this reading, these two contradictory impulses come together in the “voluntary simplicity movement.” Selecting the Home and Garden network’s reality TV series *The Good Life* as an apt expression of the movement and subjecting it to an in-depth rhetorical analysis, they find a similar theme in each episode—people “who have left highly paid, highly stressed jobs in the city and relocated to a more natural environment to live a simpler and therefore better life”—with a similar outcome: “Voluntary simplicity . . . appears to reinforce dictates of simple living while wrapped firmly within commodity culture, defining it primarily as a psychological search for self-actualization in which nature becomes a resource for purchase.” Phyllis M. Japp was a professor emerita in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of

Nebraska—Lincoln and was the coeditor, with Mark Meister, of *Enviropop: Studies in Environmental Rhetoric and Popular Culture* (2002), from which this essay is taken. Debra K. Japp is a professor of communications studies at St. Cloud State University.

The search for the good life is a major theme in human societies, from Aristotle to the present. In its current incarnation in late twentieth century America, the term represents dual and contradictory visions. Since the beginning of the nation, two major myths of the good life have developed simultaneously. The first is the belief in happiness and fulfillment through technology, the availability and acquisition of wealth and possessions, upward social mobility, and political influence. Existing alongside and countering this mythos has been the belief that happiness and fulfillment are found in a life of simplicity, one with the minimum of possessions, a life that does not seek wealth or influence but finds joy in connection to nature and service to others. As Shi (1985) notes, "From colonial days, the image of America as a spiritual commonwealth and a republic of virtue has survived alongside the more tantalizing vision of America as a cornucopia of economic opportunities and consumer delights" (p. 277). If these are the two poles in the definition of the good life, there have been many variations over the years, as each era has engaged the tension between having less and having more.

In times of prosperity and unchecked consumption, when it seems as if the "more is better" mentality has gained complete control, a growing sense of unease and guilt seems to draw the "less is more" rhetoric into focus and odes to a simpler mode of life appear.

In popular culture, the opposing visions of the good life are integrated into advertising, entertainment, and popular literature. For example, a Sears advertising campaign informs consumers that Sears stands ready to supply the "good life at a great price, guaranteed" as we view clothing, appliances, and other commodities supposedly essential to the quality of life. Alternately, the state of Nebraska's advertising slogan is "Nebraska—The Good Life," invoking visions of endless sky and bountiful prairies, a place where life is simple and nature revered. Note that however contradictory these visions are in many respects, nature in some form is necessary to their fulfillment. In the first version, nature must provide the resources utilized to manufacture the endless list of commodities now necessary to living the good life, the SUVs and fuel to run them, the lumber for bigger and bigger homes, the land that can be converted to golf courses and resorts where one can vacation in style. In the second version, nature is a spiritual and psychological resource, a retreat from the frantic pace of urban life, a reassurance in the healing powers of the earth. . . .

If the "more is better" mythos uses nature as raw material to develop and maintain the commodities necessary for the good life, the "less is more" mythos finds the real meaning of life in the human connection to natural environments.

Nature plays a central role in this vision of life. Shi (1985) observes: "Contact with nature, whether the virgin wilderness, the plowed field, or the Arcadian retreat, meant turning away from the artificiality of modern civilization to more abiding realities. God and goodness always seemed more accessible in the woods than in the city. Moreover, the countryside offered fresh air and a stimulus to strenuous activity" (p. 195). And Kenneth Burke (1984b) concurs: "The most basic support of all, the Earth, is perhaps the deepest source of reestablishment for bewildered sophisticates who, having lost all sense of a moral fountainhead, would restore themselves by contact with the 'telluric'" (p. 205).

While simple living has been a consistent theme since the beginning of the republic, it remains an abstraction that can be shaped to fit a variety of conditions and purposes. As Shi (1985) notes, "the precise meaning of the simple life has never been fixed"; rather, it has always been represented by "a shifting cluster of ideas, sentiments, and activities" (p. 3). Staple ingredients in the traditional recipe have included "a hostility toward luxury and a suspicion of riches, a reverence for nature and a preference for rural over urban ways of life and work, a desire for personal self-reliance through frugality and diligence, a nostalgia for the past and a skepticism toward the claims of modernity, conscientious rather than conspicuous consumption, and an aesthetic taste for the plain and functional" (Shi, 1985, p. 3). Thus the concept survives as both an "enduring myth" and as "an actual way of living" for at least a few citizens in each era (Shi, 1985, p. 279). In a technologically oriented commodity culture, we argue, this long-standing tradition of frugal living is transformed by an inescapable dependence on, and embrace of, products and services that have come to be defined as necessities of life. The reverence for nature is transformed into consumption as well, as the natural environment becomes yet another commodity, to be owned or appropriated as part of the simple lifestyle. Thus the rhetoric of simple living is inescapably infiltrated with the attitudes and orientations of consumption.

### Burke and Environmental Rhetoric

Kenneth Burke looms as an important figure in many works on environmental rhetoric. He is well suited to be the patron theorist of environmental criticism for several reasons. First, Burke lived the life of an environmentalist, rejecting a life revolving around commodities for one closely in touch with the earth, the seasons, the rhythms of nature. Burks (1991) notes that Burke "seems to have despised consumerism and capitalism's promotion of it throughout his adult life" (p. 224). His lifestyle (Burke called himself an "agro-bohemian" with "Garden of Eden plumbing") testified to his rejection of consumer values and his need for engagement with nature (Burks, 1991, p. 224). Second, the environment is a theme that runs through his writings. Examples of the barnyard, the wren, the hapless fish with a faulty orientation, references to walking down the road, gardening, and the weather not only permeate his

work but provided him inspiration to develop his critical perspective. Third, Burke's theory of symbolic action, his "tools" for deconstructing rhetoric, is ideal for discovering nuances in cultural artifacts. These tools are especially useful for the investigation of popular culture, for it is clear that what we desire, buy, eat, and wear, and where and how we choose to live are symbolic responses that articulate, support, and/or challenge the power structures of cultural institutions.

While Burke makes a number of specific references to the good life, the concept implicitly pervades his thought and energizes much of his terminology. Indeed, one could argue that a subtext of Burke's corpus could be the search for the good life, with attendant warnings about those motivational patterns that placed such in peril. Writing in the 1930s, Burke was traumatized by the Depression, by economic threats to the quality of life. By the 1960s he feared that nuclear war, the technology of destruction, could destroy all that we valued in life. He increasingly believed that environmental pollution, exacerbated and excused by consumer culture, stood poised to destroy any hope of a good life lived in tune with nature. Although he personally chose a life of simplicity, he was aware that the accumulation of possessions was the definition that most citizens embraced. Thus what is examined here, the cultural tension between the simple life of "less" and the commodified life of "more," is a tension also evident in Burke from *Counterstatement* (1968) to his last essays.

### "Voluntary Simplicity": A Variation on *The Good Life*

A recent trend in contemporary popular culture is often termed "voluntary simplicity." This current variation on the theme of simple living is described in how-to books, films, television programming, and magazines. A recent bibliography of over 160 recent books, posted on a simple living Web site, includes such titles as *Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life*, *101 Ways to Simplify Your Life*, *Six Weeks to a Simpler Life Style*, and *Skills for Simple Living*. Two simple living magazines have been recently launched, *Real Simple* and *Simplicity*. As *USA Today* observes in reviewing the magazines, "The simple life now comes with instructions" (Horowitz, 2000, p. 1A). Certainly there is much variation evident within this theme. Some advocate a complete lifestyle change and rejection of consumer values; others seek to downsize and de-stress within present circumstances. For still others, simplicity is a stylistic trend that determines which new home décor to purchase and what sort of vacation to take.

The vast amount of self-help literature surrounding this movement calls to mind Burke's (1973b) assertion that the people who consume such literature often have no intention of actually doing what is advocated. Reading is not the prelude to, but the substitute for, action; vicarious, armchair experience is less threatening than facing the decisions necessary for change

(Burke, 1973b, pp. 298–299). Certainly the widespread popularity of simple living ideas seems to have made little difference in the consumption styles of most of the population.

X The theme of voluntary simplicity holds an especially powerful appeal for middle-class professionals torn between the need for more and the need for less as they try to manage the complexity of their lives. As with most calls for change, however, the desire for simple, painless maxims drives this massive quantity of literature. Irony abounds as self-styled experts in simplicity write books, circulate newspapers and magazines, develop Web sites, and travel the country presenting symposiums, consuming fuel and resources in the process, thereby reinforcing the importance of money, space, mobility, and other non-simple practices. The irony is reinforced as the media technology that has developed around the desire for wealth, that is the proliferation of materials, seminars, books, and guides advising people how to get rich, is now employed to help people simplify their lives. In the case study to follow, the television program *The Good Life* depends upon a complex media organization and a profusion of technology, including the equipment required to film a television series, although such is carefully kept out of camera range, rendering invisible its intrusion on the pristine natural settings in which the program is usually filmed.

Equally ironic is that this effort at simplicity must be *voluntary*, the result of a choice to renounce affluence and artificiality. The poor, who live lives of enforced rather than voluntary simplicity, are deprived of the moral value of such lives, voluntary simplicity being the prerogative of those “free to choose their standard of living” rather than the sordid poverty of those on the lower socioeconomic rungs of the hierarchy (Shi, 1985, p. 7). “Selective indulgence” is the theme of much of the current literature. As MonDesire (2000) notes, “The nostalgic urge for a simple life by and large emanates from people who’ve never had to duck a landlord on the first of the month, never had to wait in the rain for a packed city bus that rides on by, never had to slide the money for a half-gallon of milk under the narrow slot in a grocery store’s bullet-proof window” (p. 19A).

X Overall, the simple life appears dictated by personal needs and is framed almost entirely in the desire for fulfillment and personal growth. Converts do not renounce consumerism for religious reasons, for political dedication, or as a result of an environmental conscience. The quest is personal not political; secular rather than religious; self- instead of other-centered. As defined by the oxymoronic *Simple Life Corporation*, the concept means a journey, an awakening to self and one’s inner needs, the removal of things that distract one from “finding” oneself, including not only possessions but activities, relationships, and duties. A *Cathy* cartoon strip neatly sums up the ironies. The script reads: “The simple life: Discard the day planner, disconnect call waiting, unplug the TV, cancel all subscriptions, say ‘no’ to invitations, clear closets and cupboards of everything but the bare essentials, and travel to a cool, quiet place that inspires possibility. The Mall” (Guisewite, 2000).

### HGTV's *The Good Life*

A variety of texts could be used to exemplify the rhetoric of voluntary simplicity, for example, Internet Web sites, books, advice columns, sermons, and instructional seminars, for it is the interaction of these aspects of popular culture that constructs and supports the ideologies of simple living. For this essay, a Home and Garden network (HGTV) half-hour series entitled *The Good Life* was chosen and the analysis included more than twenty episodes aired over a period of two years. Although the stories vary—there are former lawyers, professors, journalists, models, executives, importers, even oil riggers—they are all variations on a theme. All articulate a core vision of what it means to live the good life. The stories, in fact, are strikingly similar despite the assurance that the good life is different for every individual. In these dramatic presentations the cultural drama of “less is more” plays out against its counter, “more is better.” The stories are introduced as examples of people (“people just like you and me” the narrator assures us) who have left highly paid, highly stressed jobs in the city and relocated to a more natural environment to live a simpler and therefore better life. The verbal and visual dramas provide standard, mutually reinforcing formulas as viewers follow the stories of people who have changed their lives, following their dreams to the good life. Although viewers experience visual and verbal dramas simultaneously, in this essay visual and verbal dramas are each considered first as a separate domain of meaning, and then considered together to point out how each complements the other as they construct the meanings of *The Good Life*.

### The Verbal Drama of *The Good Life*

The verbal drama of *The Good Life* is a classic example of Burke's dramatic process of guilt, repentance, and redemption. This well-known cycle of cleansing, drawn from religious rhetoric, is appropriated by Burke as a critical strategy for understanding how both social and personal change takes place symbolically. In this drama, conflicts of motives construct hierarchies, which in turn create various sorts of guilt. These shortcomings, when recognized, require change or redemption. Burke argues this process as fundamental to human communication. Thus in any situation, a critic can profitably look for the guilt, that is, the shortcoming, inadequacy, inconsistency, need for closure, that is the impetus for communicating. In the inevitable socioeconomic hierarchies, those with more are guilty of their excesses, those with less, of their lack of prestige or attainments; and each must seek to be redeemed via explanation and justification. In any social structure characterized by hierarchies, says Burke (1966), “Those ‘Up’ are guilty of not being ‘Down,’ those ‘Down’ are certainly guilty of not being ‘Up’” (p. 15). These are not necessarily conscious emotions or explicit rhetorical strategies but are inherent motives or “patterns of action” that drive explanations, justifications, comparisons, identifications,

divisions. In *The Good Life*, these implicit motives become an explicit motif or narrative form.

*The Good Life* features such salvation stories as its fundamental script. Participants guilty of the sin of overwork at high-stress professions and refugees from frantic urban lifestyles repent of their erring ways and seek redemption. Nature is, as we will see, the primary agency of purification. Thus each episode of *The Good Life* turns on a conversion experience, as overworked suburbanites discover that something is missing in their lives and embrace change. At the root of their desires is a need for purification, through nature, from the guilt of consumerism. They repent, turn from their current way of life, and become new people, born again to a supposedly simpler existence, closer to nature, and implicitly, closer to God. Edye Ellis, the host and guru of the program, serves as an evangelist for this lifestyle change, exhorting others to follow in the footsteps of those whose conversion story was featured in this week's program. As with the self-help genre that infuses this portrayal, there is the "before and after" theme characteristic of any narrative of change (weight loss, addiction recovery, relational renewal, or political or religious conversions, to mention a few examples). The story each week follows the standard form of conversion testimony, from guilt to repentance to redemption.

*Establishing guilt.* The narrative begins with attention to the pathology of the participants' old way of life, by implication a "bad life." They describe their former lives as filled with stress, complexity, urban crowding, and long daily commutes, as they recount long hours on the job, mourn their disconnect from nature, and describe familial relationships in peril. The resulting self-diagnosis is described as a loss of self, identity, and meaning. They are no longer satisfied with the success they sought, the prestige gained, or the possessions accumulated by climbing the ladder to the top of their professions. "There must be something better" is the mantra of these seeking souls. For example, a former university dean tells of the day he discovered that he "had everything he wanted but didn't want anything he had" and vowed to quit his job and change his life.

*Evincing repentance.* The conversion always involves risk as well as renunciation. Penitents must pay the price by taking an economic or social risk, giving up something, either something *actual* (e.g., a high salary, social prestige) or *potential* (e.g., the chance for advancement). The "no pain, no gain" formula is reminiscent of the stories of risk-taking in pursuit of wealth. The definitions of risk, however, are comfortably middle class, attractive to those who know they can somehow recover what may be lost. Thus they risk investing their savings in a business, in a move from a familiar location, by leaving their circle of friends, by choosing to live in a smaller space, or by making do with fewer possessions in their quest for something better. Although there is an attempt to maintain suspense, risk remains little more than a minor and temporary challenge to their middle-class values and identities. For example, a former journalist risks his savings to open a bakery in a small town, a

Texas landscaper invests his life savings to convert a rural hotel to a bed-and-breakfast, a Chicago lawyer abandons his practice to open a restaurant.

*Seeking redemption.* Once willingness to risk is established, the redemptive moment of the narrative occurs, a turning point of almost mystical quality. Some penitents drive down a country road and find at the end a location where they are "meant to be." Or they may discover a small town and feel instantly as if they were born there. Almost always this redemptive moment involves some contact with the earth, or with nature in some form. This mystical moment is also a pivotal point at which penitents can surrender and embrace the salvation of the good life or draw back from the risk and remain doomed to its alternative. Following the muse involves, above all, the search for a location where a good life is possible. Few manage the conversion without some physical move, most frequently from urban to rural, large town to small town.

Thus, communion with nature is essential to the good life, whether from a cabin in the woods, a farm, the rural charm of a small town, or even a tranquil garden in a suburban backyard. Also essential to the conversion experience is a new occupation compatible with the conversion values. Work in some form is essential; few remain idle. Entrepreneurship is especially attractive, satisfying the yearning to be one's own boss, control one's own time. Artistry is likewise a key to the good life (writing, crafting, achieving creative fulfillment, and frequently making money from the endeavor). The new occupation or avocation often requires some contact with the earth, from growing one's own food to using natural products to make beautiful and artistic creations.

A constant redemptive theme is the search for ideal relationships, for people with whom one can live the good life. Some converts bring intact families in need of renewal via simplicity; some seek change because of broken relationships and look for new, like-minded friends and/or life partners. Problems in previous relationships are linked to the values and practices of the old life (to date we have seen no programs about those whose relationships have broken up as a result of converting to the simple life). The search for self is paramount, however. As the old life is stripped away, as old locations, occupations, and relationships are replaced, the unique authentic self of the convert is revealed, hidden below the artificiality of the old life. The needs that were ignored in the complexity of urban professional life can now thrive and grow. Hidden skills and talents are uncovered: a professor discovers he is an artist, a former model becomes a world-class chef, others find amazing abilities to sculpt, create music, take prize-winning photographs.

*Bearing witness.* The final turn of the salvation drama is the evangelical responsibility of the convert. All participants devoutly affirm that they are now living the good life, lives of "deep fulfillment" as one declares. To a person, they express no regrets or nostalgia for the life left behind. The gains are far greater than the losses, the satisfaction worth the risk. They encourage others to make the same choice, again emphasizing choice and reinforcing



the voluntary nature of their life change. The host completes the narrative with an altar call for conversion as she addresses viewers directly: "You too can have the good life." Like these inspiring stories, renewal begins "one step at a time."

Nature's role as commodity is evident in the consumerist attitude of selecting and owning an appropriate natural setting or backdrop for living the simple life. Control of life choices remains central; the stories turn on the volunteerist motive. The centrality of voluntary choice is significant. It implies that what has been surrendered can, if desired, be reappropriated. Participants stress they could have continued, even succeeded, in their former circumstances but chose to change their lives, always for personal and relational reasons. Thus choice implies a way out if the rigors of simple living are too great and smoothes a path back into the former lifestyle. The factors that support the ability to choose simplicity (money, education, social class) are also the very attributes necessary to success in a consumer society; thus these important qualities remain the property of the individual, to be played out as desires dictate. The sense of entitlement or ownership of nature as well as the implicit dependence on the attributes of consumerism continue to reinforce the orientations of the "old life," undermining the claims of conversion to simplicity.

### **The Visual Drama of *The Good Life***

In this analysis of the visual drama of *The Good Life*, another dimension of Burke's dramatism is used, focusing on how various elements are presented visually as the substance or grounding of the good life. Burke's pentad is built upon the concept of substance, the symbolically constructed foundation or basis on which various aspects of the drama are played out. Burke (1973a) identifies five major orientations that compel the human drama—scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose (pp. 21–23). Humans use symbol systems to constitute their situations and contexts, their identities and differences, their shared pasts and futures, their needs, goals, desires. In the process, they construct compelling explanations of the human condition—narratives of human agency, of the constraining power of natural conditions, of being bound or liberated by ideas, of individual desire or cooperative action that overpowers restraints. Burke (1973a) argues that these orientations and the tensions among them, e.g. the struggle between the power of will (agent) and the power of situation (scene), are necessary to any well-rounded explanation of "what people are doing and why they are doing it" (p. xv). This perspective seems ideal for exploring the visual drama of *The Good Life* because of the overwhelming visual power of the physical settings as the essence or substance of the good life. We concentrate on the primacy of the scenic in the visualizations of the good life but the other terms are ever-present and inevitably accessed in understandings of the visual drama presented in the program.

X *Nature as scene.* The visual drama powerfully constructs the scenic dimension of the good life, both the foundational substance that grounds this life and the context, that is, the physical spaces or places in which the good life can be lived. Nature is a major component of both the grounding and the setting of a good life. But this scene is not raw and unruly nature. It is a nature ordered, controlled, and structured into the perfect setting for the values and qualities of the good life. This nature of pristine mountains, meadows, streams, and oceans is a nature without heat, humidity, drought, cold, damp, mosquitoes, snakes, storms, or blight. Thus the camera pans over beautiful views, bountiful gardens, wildlife, forests, landscaped lawns, even occasional swimming pools and guest houses. Nature here is a visual feast, with shots carefully chosen to exclude power lines, cellular towers, jet contrails, litter, dams, encroaching urbanization, highways, and other visual blights from human development. Likewise the cameras, trucks, and other equipment necessary to filming are carefully kept out of camera range, as noted above, ignoring the irony that their presence destroys the very tranquility they are attempting to capture.

As the scene of the good life is visualized, it is done in true Burkean fashion by referencing what it "is not" in order to substantiate what it "is." Shots of the "old life" of stress and complexity, pollution and gridlock, are juxtaposed with those of the "new life." Nature thus is instantiated as both the substance that generates the good life and the setting or scene in which such a life is possible. (Of course, by implication, the scenes of the old life become places where a good life is not possible.)

X *Style as scene.* There is another component to the scene, however, overlapping and extending the emphasis on nature. If the good life is grounded in nature, it is also rooted in the stylistic, an element necessary to separate the middle-class good life from the inadvertent and unavoidable simplicity of poverty and lower-class existence. Burke (1984b) defines style as a moral dimension of symbolizing that involves doing or being "right," that is, appropriate to the situation. It is "an elaborate set of prescriptions and proscriptions for 'doing the right thing' . . . a complex schema of what-goes-with-what carried through all the subtleties of manner and attitudes" (pp. 268-269). Those scenes and agents imbued with style determine the "correct" use of commodities. While most folks dress themselves, set their tables, and decorate their homes, to do so with style requires a knowledge of the nuances of social correctness as well as a flair for originality within the bounds of appropriateness. Thus style is an option for those with money and good taste, setting them apart from those who must take whatever is available at a price they can afford.

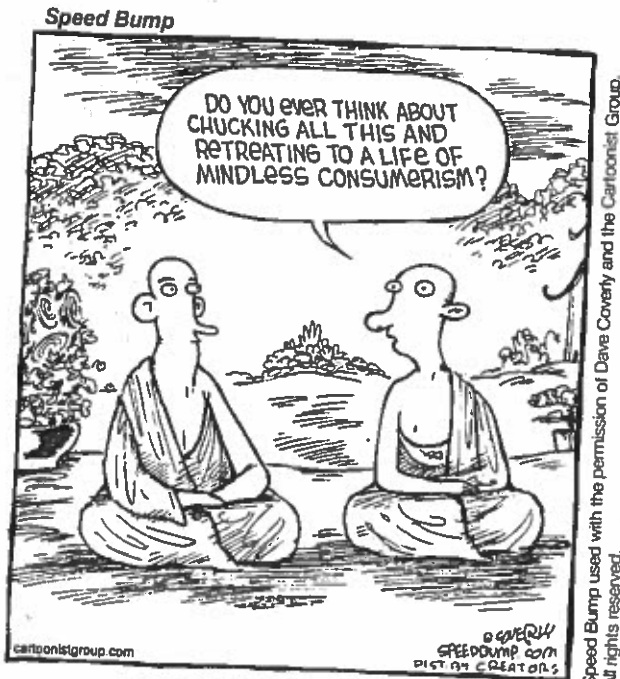
In *The Good Life*, nature as chief commodity must be stylized, made appropriate to the scene. Just as the natural beauty of the outdoors is configured into an aesthetic backdrop for the good life, the interiors of the simple but tasteful abodes are charmingly decorated with arts, crafts, and fabrics that utilize nature in elegant and artistic ways. Edye Ellis, the host of the program and the Martha Stewart of simple living, provides an enduring aura of taste, elegance, and aesthetic appeal. Cameras linger on Edye as she poses

with flower arrangements, room décor, gardens, beautiful views, and tasteful accessories that embed style into the substance of the good life.

*"Doing" nature with style: Constructing agents.* Thus, these two components, nature and style, combine to produce the grounding for the good life. The scene, however, requires agents appropriate to that scene, generated by and imbued with its qualities. As Burke (1973a) explains: "It is a principle of drama that the nature of acts and agents should be consistent with the nature of the scene" (p. 3). As the verbal narrative stresses, converts to the good life must experience a rebirth, a reawakening of appreciation for nature and their own artistic abilities. The visual drama chronicles this rebirth. We see photos of the subjects as children, growing up, engaging as adults in the "bad life," juxtaposed with shots of new converts enjoying the good life. The visual connection between "what I was and what I am" constructs a new identity forged by their identification with the scene.

As noted above, converts to the good life almost always discover hidden artistic talents that can only now be developed. Abilities to paint, sculpt, photograph, decorate, or do crafts emerge as if by magic, as the substance of the good life draws these forth from participants. They thus possess the necessary style to be appropriate agents in the good life drama, style being a latent quality called forth by their participation in the scene. We often see participants actually constructing, physically and metaphorically, their placement in the new location. Often at the end of the program, the camera integrates agent and scene, as it lingers on converts engaged in the daily routines of the good life, for example, walking in the woods or by a lake, taking in a natural panorama from a deck, working in the garden, creating artistic objects from natural products, tastefully decorating their homes, or taking photographs of nature. The visual message is: "This is the good life and we now belong here, we have grown from and are now situated in this place, like the mountains and trees that surround us."

*The snake in the garden: Commodity as agency.* The visual drama has another component, however, one that challenges and ultimately overpowers the Edenic visions of the good life, infusing both scene and agent with the values of commodity culture—advertising. According to Burke (1973a), agency is the manner or means by which action is possible (p. xv). Advertising thus is implicitly the agency or means by which a good life is possible. As with all television programming, advertising is a vital ingredient of the program, and becomes part of the visual flow of meaning. The viewer can validly assume that the products advertised are by implication those necessary for, or at least compatible with, the good life. Television programming constructs a flow of meaning, evoking "subtle associations between aspects of the show and the commodity" presented in the commercials (Budd, Craig, & Steinman, 1999, pp. 153–154). Thus as visuals of nature are juxtaposed with repeated ads for luxury automobiles, vacation cruises, and investment opportunities, the program implicitly argues that expensive commodities, consumed with style, are essential to the good life. In fact, these commodities and the wealth they imply are instantiated as



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the agency or means through which the good life is attained, making this a life framed by, surrounded by, and energized by consumer culture.

Style therefore is the essential quality that links nature and consumer culture. Living with nature appropriately requires style, just as style requires appreciation of the finest commodities that only money can purchase. The good life, then, uses consumption (with style) as agency to bridge the fundamental disjunction that has always rested at the heart of this culture's vision of the good life, the term that connects the "less is more" and "more is better" versions of the good life. As visualized in this program, the good life apparently means being able to drive up to your rural abode in your new Lexus, booking a Caribbean cruise from your rustic living room when you need a break from simplicity, and taking it for granted that you have a right to consume both nature and commodities as long as you do it with style.

### **Interaction of the Visual and Verbal Dramas of *The Good Life***

Obviously the verbal and visual dramas are interdependent, both needed to define the good life. If one considers the verbal narrative the dominant narrative—and that is only because our tools for dealing with words are

more familiar—the visual narrative reduces and expands, abstracts and concretizes the verbal. Together the verbal and the visual dramas reside in the tensions between stability and change. If the verbal drama is the story of change, of agential choice shaping, molding, creating the desired environments for one's salvation, the visual drama privileges scenic power, as stable, enduring nature embraces the prodigal, restores those who dwell therein to the timeless serenity of the universe. The incompleteness of each makes space for the other; in their contradictions lies satisfactory completion.

The verbal drama of choice includes no admission that the lifestyle of consumption being renounced bears any responsibility for misuse of nature. The visual narrative presents a static, ever-stable natural beauty, for example, pristine mountains, streams, and meadows unaffected by human excess and mismanagement. As noted, nature is visual artwork, purchased and now possessed via the risks taken. In no sense is it an active entity. This visualization of nature energizes the verbal, temporal drama of human quest. The eternal ever-present backdrop of nature becomes an object of desire in the temporal formula, placed back in eternal timelessness at the end. Each narrative (spatial and temporal) supports and constrains the other. The visual reduces nature to an aesthetic that complements the verbal drama's definition of nature as a choice of lifestyle, implying that a beautiful environment exists to satisfy human desires but failing to assign any responsibility for preserving that environment.

HGTV's *The Good Life* is one example, among many, of current visions of simple living. It is particularly striking because it embeds so many values in one compact package and presents so many seemingly oppositional ideas in a coherent verbal and visual narrative; this version of the good life provides vicarious atonement, offers the chance to reform without serious sacrifice. Its pathology is that it allows no serious economic, social, or environmental issues to emerge. It reduces complex, potentially tragic consequences of policies and practices to matters of individual preference, stylistic choices, aesthetic visions. Here the good life is about following one's own dream, discovering one's inner self. It is individualized as the freedom to "do what I want, when I want," as a number of participants observe. There are no stories of failure, no acknowledgment of social responsibility, no sympathy for those who cannot choose. It maintains the myth of infinite possibility for all, defining simplicity not as a moral alternative or environmental necessity but as a trendy lifestyle, allowing the viewer to forget that only the fortunate few can choose to leave a mess they have helped to create and maintain for a flight to rural, unspoiled areas.

By implication, the good life takes place in select localities, in rural, sparsely populated, attractive, and relatively unspoiled places such as the slopes of the Rockies, the foothills of the Appalachians, the ocean, lakefront, or bayou, in quaint New England towns, in other rural and unspoiled beauty spots of the nation. The visual component strengthens the aesthetic and

grounds it in nature in ways the verbal cannot. Most examples presented in *The Good Life* require money, influence, and taste as the converts attempt to create a lifestyle of elegance and beauty in a new setting. Great emphasis is placed on improving communication in families and relationships; nature is the mystique that makes this possible. The work ethic is retained but relocated to include contact with nature. Each episode ends with an altar call, "You too can have the good life."

Thus, the good life utilizes natural environments as a stage-set for a lifestyle that continues to valorize commodity culture. Nature, in fact, is the foremost commodity; in order to live the good life it must be purchased, modified, and controlled. Nature and simplicity must be managed with the same skills and dedication that former professional careers were managed. As Burke (1973b) observes, the vision of the good life was built around the

ideal of the "live-wire" salesman, with culture taken to mean the maximum purchase of manufactured commodities. . . . Out of books, out of delightful moments in one's personal life, out of sporadic voyages, out of *vacational* experiences as distinct from *vocational* ones, people got visions of a noncompetitive structure of living, a "good life" involving gentle surroundings, adequate physical outlets, the pursuit of knowledge, etc., and the very slogans of the commercial ethic assured them that they were "entitled" to all this. (p. 248)

## Conclusion

Voluntary simplicity in 2002, then, appears to reinforce the dictates of simple living while wrapped firmly within commodity culture, defining it primarily as a psychological search for self-actualization in which nature becomes a resource for purchase. It calls us not to change our ways but to dabble in self-fulfillment, while continuing on our present course of overconsumption and self-indulgence. By reducing the issues to individual conversion experiences, there is no need for national repentance, for a brake on conspicuous and wasteful consumption of resources. As this example illustrates, the simple life discourse is framed in and contained by assumptions and connections to consumption. It is constructed in the language of a consumer society. It is not a call for change but a powerful endorsement of the status quo. The cultural myth of success, the "divine right" to consume the world's resources, the unwillingness to acknowledge that the environment is not merely a backdrop or stage-set for our consumption of goods and enactment of trendy lifestyles, makes many current odes to simplicity, the "less is more" narratives, merely alternate versions of the "more is better" stories.

One program from one genre of popular culture—television entertainment—says little except when, as with *The Good Life*, its assumptions and expectations are deeply embedded in American culture. The program draws

from and reinforces the powers of consumerism and the inevitable subsuming of environmental concerns to consumerist values. When these same assumptions, expectations, and values are evident across various genres of popular culture, they become an uncritical and unconscious dimension of our cultural reality. Popular culture thus implicitly assures us that we are entitled to a good life, whether one of economic complexity or voluntary simplicity, and offers us nature for sale, an environment to be purchased and used in the search for personal fulfillment.

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#### READING THE TEXT

1. What are the two major myths of the good life in American culture, according to Japp and Japp? What belief do Americans hold that contradicts the two major myths?
2. Summarize in your own words rhetorician Kenneth Burke's theory of symbolic action and how it applies to the HGTV program *The Good Life*.
3. How does American popular culture reflect, or mediate, the contradictory tendencies in Americans' views of the good life, according to the article?
4. What is the "voluntary simplicity movement," and how is it represented in *The Good Life*?
5. What are the "visual" and "verbal" dramas of *The Good Life*?