

Picture: BIG PICTURES



Spice of life: for women, shopping is as big as work

## Shopping as seduction? Yes, I think I can buy that

The big store provides women with comfort, attention – and a substitute for sex, argues **Germaine Greer**

**W**OMEN are people who shop. Shopping is the festival of the female oppressed; impecunious old ladies may sign on for day trips to Lakeside where they may fantasy shop; little girls who have even less money than old ladies learn to shop by haunting the mall when they should be in school. Sex being largely unavailable or unsatisfactory, shopping is the substitute.

Any man who accompanies a woman on her search for orgasm by purchase is surplus to requirements. Mostly, he simply refuses to join in. "You want it, buy it," is his response. "Yes, but do you like it?" from her meets with no response. What she is angling for is to get him to join in the endless wooing process that is shopping.

What happens when the female shopper enters the shopping environment is that she offers herself up to a process of seduction, which

will last as long as she wants it to last. She is the potential purchaser, she has the money (or the promise of it), and she has no intention of yielding it up without a pleasurable struggle.

The key to her behaviour may be seen in the mating behaviour of many insect and animal species, in which the female affects indifference to the posturing male, walks away, wanders back, nibbles at whatever tidbit he may be offering, affects to spurn it, and so on, back and forth, heightening the tension and indulging herself in the enjoyment of his undivided attention.

Indecision is the name of the game, indecision which may be prolonged at will. Most large stores and shopping centres now have coffee shops, so that, like the female pigeon or the butterfly, the shopping woman may feed off and on during the courtship.

The vending institution

trains its staff in the techniques of seduction, which are, as they have always been, flattery and teasing mixed with a pretence of caring and warm concern. The salesperson acts the part of the ally of the potential client, stroking her ego by paying compliments not only to her looks but to her taste and common sense.

Success in this seduction, as in sexual seduction, will be facilitated by the woman's longing for admiration, approval, affection, comfort and intimacy and her readiness to deceive herself and make believe that she has found them in a stranger. As she succumbs and spends £50 on a cream with which she may caress her lonely skin, she tells herself, as L'Oréal so brazenly says, that it is "because I'm worth it". Shopping is the recommended palliative for low self-esteem.

Shopping also contains the antidote for female

loneliness, or so we are led to believe. A more accurate account might be that vendors exploit women's loneliness by offering fake comradeship; the brief for designers of shopping environments is that they be colourful, warm and welcoming, rather than functional and efficient.

They should smell good, be softly lighted, and laid out in such a manner that the shopper must wander about as in an arbour, with the wares displayed about like the golden apples of the Hesperides hanging from the branches. Here, no one will challenge her, unless it is softly to ask if she is being looked after.

Supermarkets have their own version of the arbour in that they deliberately create a maze in which the shopper cannot find what she wants without scrutinising a great deal of what she does not want. The creature comfort offered there comes in the

form of club or loyalty cards which invite her to belong.

The pecuniary rewards promised by such schemes are illusory, but the illusion itself is cherished; 60 per cent of women with children who shop at supermarkets are members of loyalty schemes, which to some extent make up for the comfortlessness of the supermarket experience.

As a shopper, then, a woman expects attention; indeed, it may be only as a shopper that she will get this concentrated attention. The sexual grammar of the selling situation explains why it is that older women cannot get the same attention. A salesperson will spend hours trying to sell an expensive face cream to a woman of her own age, but an older customer will probably be left to sell it to herself.

Most shopping is inconclusive; if shopping is an end in itself, buying will be delayed as long as possible. The opportunities to

buy must be made as numerous as funds permit, so we are not surprised to find women buying lots of little things; the larger purchases are more often made with men or by men, and involve more rational decisions about suitability, durability and value than those involved in buying a lipstick or a pair of tights.

A woman who tries to buy a year's supply of the tights that she knows she wants will find that she cannot, because the store does not have enough of her size and preferred colour in stock. She is there to shop, not to buy. She can have one or two pairs of tights; they want to see her back there next week for more seduction, to teach her to satisfy wants she didn't know she had, rather than the one she knows she has.

Men don't shop, or rather men who don't eat quiche don't shop. Men who have bought the masculinist package will not enter into

the seduction situation, or, if they find themselves in it, will bring it to as speedy an end as possible. They also refuse to join in with the seducers of the shopping woman, which is why they will not tell her that her bum looks big in that or that the pink becomes her better than the blue.

For 50 years, the media have celebrated shopping as the most enjoyable pastime open to women; during that time, women have ceased making their own clothes and have spent hugely increasing amounts on fashion and beauty. They buy more food than they cook, and vast quantities of compounds to make their already clean houses even cleaner.

Shopping is now women's primary economic function; if they do paid work, it is in the intervals between shopping, which is unpaid work, most of it undesirable and unnecessary. Such is women's liberation in the year 2000.

Small, nifty and gleaming, the Micro scooter is becoming part of our urban landscape. **Rob McGibbon** meets its maker

## One man and his silver machine

**T**HERE was a time, not long ago, when people laughed at Wim Ouboter and his Micro Skate Scooter. As he carried his invention — the product of nearly a decade's work and £100,000 of his own money — through company offices and sports trade fairs, he began to despair of ever being taken seriously.

"I tried lots of people," he remembers, "but they all said it was not cool enough, it wouldn't sell. They thought it was a toy and people thought I was a bit of a joke."

But now, two years later, Ouboter's super slick, pearl polished aluminium version of the Seventies children's toy has become the craze of the summer. Robbie Williams has one, actors Jude Law and Sadie Frost ride theirs together and Harrison Ford has bought a couple for his children. Trendy

child's toy came back into his mind. After a spell in banking, which he had hated, he was juggling several businesses of his own — a small textile company and one trading in specialised machine parts — as well as dealing in property.

Like any stressed out, single thirtysomething, he was forever faced with an empty fridge after a late night at the office. There were no takeaways near his flat in the Zurich suburbs, except one that was a good 20 minutes walk away.

It was one of those awkward distances that was too short to justify taking the car or unlocking the bike from the basement, but too far to hike late at night after a long day's work. Although Ouboter was earning a decent enough living, he had always dreamt of being an inventor, so he set about building a solution.

"I wanted to make something



Picture: KEYSTONE/MARTIN RUETSCHI

ers in Taiwan saved me because they believed in the Micro and they delayed payments on the money I owed them. Then we decided to go it alone and get it into the shops ourselves without the backing of an established company."

Finally, 18 months ago, the first batch of 20,000 Micros went on sale in Japan and sold out within weeks. The Micro proved not only to be fun for children, it was also perfect for commuters to carry on packed Tokyo underground trains.

For the past six months, Ouboter's life has been in a spin. He is fast becoming a celebrity in Switzerland, where he is seen as a transport visionary rather than just a one-off inventor. He won a prestigious international design prize in Germany and is often asked to lecture to young designers and engineers.

He has already linked up with



couple for his children. Trendy students use them instead of the bus and the Micro is even seen cutting through the morning crush in the City.

A few weeks ago, Ouboter celebrated becoming a millionaire, and his fortune is set to grow. Some 5,000 of his scooters are being sold each week in Britain and, in the United States, the retail giant Wal-Mart has ordered three million Micros — or Razors as they are known there — to cash in on the rush.

Two new Micro designs will be launched this summer and now companies such as Volkswagen are wooing the 40-year-old Swiss entrepreneur with takeover offers to expand his vision of "micro-mobility" for city life.

"It is wonderful how the Micro has taken off," Ouboter says. "There were many times over the past few years when I nearly gave up, but I had to stick with it, because I knew in my heart that people would want my scooter."

Like many inventions, the Micro arose from the need to solve an everyday problem, but the seeds of the idea were sown when Ouboter was a child.

He and his two sisters, Patricia and Corinna, who grew up in a small town near Lake Zurich, used their old-fashioned, fat-wheeled scooters in the way that most children use bicycles. There was a reason for this: Corinna was born with one leg six inches shorter than the other, so she had to wear built-up shoes and was unable to ride a bike.

All three of the children loved their scooters and Wim took to his at the age of five. Instead of going on bike rides, the family would drive up into the hills around Zurich and the children would race down on their scooters.

Nine years ago, that clunky

"I wanted to make something that I could use easily to get me to the Star Grill. I am quite a lazy guy, so I didn't want to walk."

"I drew some designs and made the first prototype over two weekends. The first weekend, I bought the materials — some in-line skates and some steel — and the next weekend, I started making a scooter. I took the wheels off the skates,

**'I wanted to get to the Star Grill for a takeaway. I am quite a lazy guy, so I didn't want to walk'**

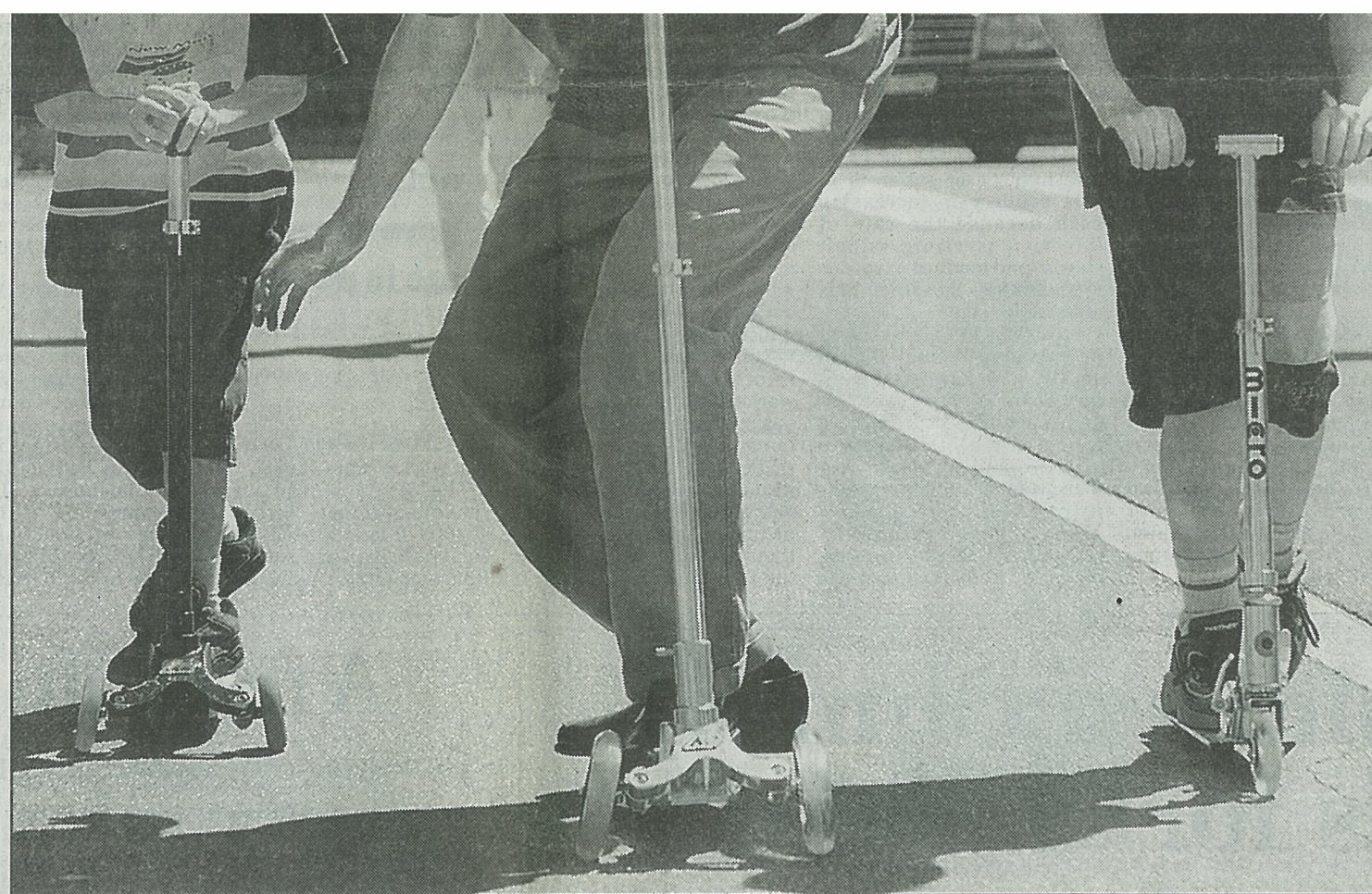
bolted them to the steel and attached an old bike column for the steering. That was the first Micro.

"This one was a bit too difficult to ride, it did not fold up very well and it was quite heavy, so I started on a second prototype made of aluminium, which was much better. I used this around my neighbourhood and in the city on my way to work."

"Everyone thought I was crazy and I looked so funny that people laughed at me. There was a really negative reaction. Even some of my closest friends laughed at me."

Ouboter was so put off that he consigned the scooter to the basement, where it remained for several years. But during this period, he married and his wife, Janine — like him, a natural risk-taker — urged him to see the project through.

"While I was at work, the



**Out and about: Wim Ouboter struggled to gain acceptance for his scooter. 'Even some of my closest friends laughed at me'**

children from my neighbourhood saw the scooter and would ask Janine if they could have a ride. Word got around and soon all the kids wanted a go.

"I would come home at night and my wife would tell me that sometimes she had 16 kids waiting for their turn on the scooter. She said to me: 'Children are very honest, if they think something is good, they stick with it. The children cannot be wrong, you have to pursue this.' After that, I developed a third prototype and

invested more money in it."

Ouboter fine-tuned the Micro; he also came up with a sport version, called the Kickboard, which has two wheels at the front and one at the back and is designed for stunts and speed.

He struggled to gain any support for either product but thought he had finally cracked it when a major manufacturer expressed interest in buying his scooters and giving them away with one of its new products.

It seemed that Ouboter was on his way, but the manufac-

turer refused to bankroll the project: he would have to finance the whole thing himself. Undaunted, he found a manufacturer in Taiwan and production of the Micro began.

No sooner had the production line started than his hoped-for deal was off. Suddenly, Ouboter's calls were no longer returned. He was left high and dry with a shipment of Micros on the way. "I got letters saying the three things you hate to hear most when you are trying to make something work: 'nice

meeting', 'no thank you', 'good luck in the future'.

"This was one of the most frustrating times because I was so committed to the Micro. Suddenly, I had no idea how I was going to market it. I took the scooter to sports trade fairs and showed it to big companies like Adidas, Salomon and K2.

"It was so disheartening because we had gone so far. I thought I was going to lose all the money I had put into the project.

"Thankfully, my manufactur-

He has already linked up with the Swiss national railway to offer season ticket holders the chance to buy Micros at a discount and this summer, Berlin will begin a pilot scheme of Micro stations, where travellers can rent a scooter for a small fee to use around the city instead of taking the buses or taxis. There are plans to introduce them in airports for the last-minute dash to the departure gate.

Winning the respect of the company chiefs who turned him down a few years back has been a sweet victory for Ouboter. The Kickboard has now been backed by K2, the sporting goods giant, and he hopes that Kickboarding will become a recognised international sport.

Remarkably, his company is still run by just five staff from a two-bedroom apartment in Zurich. The strain is beginning to tell on Ouboter, who is working 16-hour days.

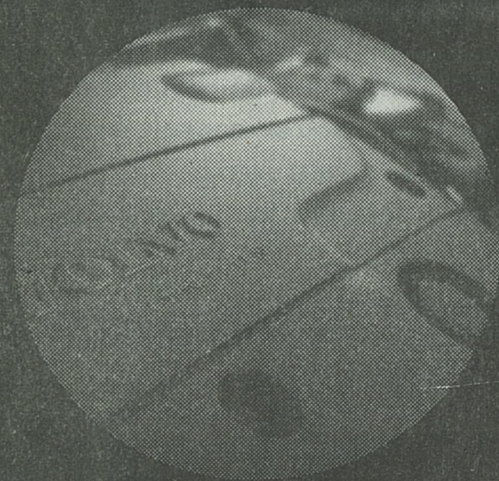
Although he has a carefree, wild streak, he also has incredible patience and discipline, and he has needed both to deal with a wave of patent infringement cases. Last month alone, his lawyers closed four factories in China and at a world bicycle trade fair earlier this year, the stalls were awash with Micro lookalikes.

"The pressure has been huge over the past few months. Everyone wants a piece of you when you have something hot. I feel bad because I hardly get to see my children at the moment — I have two sons, four and six — and when I do, I don't have any energy left, but they seem to understand."

"Although it is tough, it is very rewarding and I feel proud that I have got this far. I do not have to make another million. I could stop now because I am happy that I made my original idea work. I saw it through and got to the finish."

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