

Progress reports

Geographies of retailing and consumption

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I A reconstructed retail geography

In this, the first of three reports on geographies of retailing and consumption, I will attempt to map out and delimit the boundaries of this large and growing research area. From being one of the most undertheorized and 'boring of fields' (Blomley, 1996), retail geography has come to occupy a central position within social-scientific research. Some commentators have gone so far as to suggest that the spaces, places and practices of consumption, circulation and exchange lie at the very heart of a reconstructed economic geography (Crang, 1997), and that retailing is in many ways redefining the economic and cultural horizons of contemporary Britain (Mort, 1995). Quite how such a transformation has occurred forms the basis of the following account.

Part of the problem with early work in retail geography was its inability to take either its economic or its cultural geographies seriously, the result being a largely descriptive and all too often simplistic mapping of store location, location, location. While many cultural theorists, historians and anthropologists at the time were exploring the ways in which retailing and consumption spaces act as key sites for the (re)production of meanings and the constitution of identities (Leach, 1984; Wolff, 1985; Benson, 1986; Abelson, 1989; Buck-Morss, 1989; Dowling, 1991; Williamson, 1992), retail geographers were slow to interrogate the ways in which consumer spaces can be at once material sites for commodity exchange *and* symbolic and metaphoric territories. The result was that retail geographies throughout much of the 1980s remained woefully undertheorized (Blomley, 1996). This early emphasis on retailers and store location activities served to 'misrepresent both the wider structure of the commodity channel and the status of consumption in shaping retail change' (Clarke, 1996: 295).

However, the decade of the 1990s was a period when a reconstructed retail geography began to take shape, stimulated in part by Ducatel and Blomley's (1990: 225)

plea that 'retail capital and its transformation is a vital and relevant topic for research and demands urgent attention'. This call for a theoretically informed interrogation of the spatial organization of retail capital resulted in a flourishing of new geographical work on retail restructuring which explored corporate strategy, market structures and the spatial switching of capital (Christopherson, 1993; Clark, 1993; 1994; Wrigley, 1991; 1992; 1993a; 1993b; 1994; Doel, 1996). Throughout the 1980s the structure of retailing in both the UK and North America underwent a profound concentration process. Through processes of acquisition and merger the retail sector became progressively more concentrated such that a handful of stores came to dominate the high street across a range of sectors, but particularly in food and clothing retailing (Crewe and Davenport, 1992; Wrigley, 1991; 1993a; 1994; Hughes, 1996; Langston *et al.*, 1998). In the case of food, for example, just five retailers controlled 60% of the total UK grocery market in 1990 (Marsden, 1998) and just six fashion retailers accounted for almost 40% of UK clothing sales in the late 1980s (Crewe and Davenport, 1992). These shifts raised particular sets of questions for retail geographers who acknowledged the need – both theoretically and also more pragmatically in terms of policy formulation – to take on board the immense power exerted by these 'new masters' of the food and fashion systems (Flynn and Marsden, 1992). Such organizational shifts within the retail arena coincided with a neo-conservative political project centred around deregulation and the freeing up of the market. Together, these shifts bestowed enormous power and responsibility on retail capital and focused academic attention on the complex and contradictory relations of retail capital with the regulatory state (Wrigley and Lowe, 1996; Wrigley, 1998). Such studies looked particularly at the ways in which the macro-regulatory environment shapes corporate strategy, and in turn how the tensions and contradictions between public and private sector interests meet and are played out in the particular case of the food system (Murdoch, 1995; Marsden and Wrigley, 1995; 1996; Harrison *et al.*, 1997; Wrigley, 1997a; 1997b; Flynn *et al.*, 1998; Marsden *et al.*, 1998a). Rich and insightful though this literature was, it remained both empirically and conceptually partial, in that sectorally it focused almost without exception on the food system, and conceptually it privileged economically driven explanations of retail change at the expense of more culturally sensitive accounts.

II New retail places, spaces and sites

1 The department store and the mall

More recently both the spatiality and the historico-specificity of retailing and consumption spaces began to form an important component of new work. Alongside work on the contemporary international expansion of key retail formats such as the deep discounter, the big box retailer and the supermarket giant (see Hughes, 1999; Wrigley, 1999a; 1999b; Wrigley and Clarke, 1999), a range of studies began to interrogate the historical and spatial shifts in retail spaces and formats which 'described an arc from the arcades and department stores of Paris through to the shopping malls of the United States' (Miller *et al.*, 1998: 3). While a range of studies unearthed the historical roots of apparently 'new' consumption practices (Dowling, 1993; Glennie and Thrift, 1993; Blomley, 1996; Domosh, 1996), others focused more on the mall as a hegemonic

consumption space, the 'urban cathedral' of the 1980s which fragments and disrupts geographical space and time (Chaney, 1990; Goss, 1993).

Important though such literatures are, and although ranging across several disciplines, much retail work to date has been confined to such formal urban spaces as the high street, the mall, the supermarket and the department store (Feinberg *et al.*, 1989; Chaney, 1990; Gross, 1993; Nava, 1995; Gottdiener, 1986; 1997; Miller *et al.*, 1998). But to see private urban malls as iconic of contemporary retailing is to simplify the complexity of consumption spaces and practices as well as to deny the social, cultural and economic significance of a range of other spaces which have hitherto been marginalized or neglected within much work to date.

2 The street

While the street has been a key feature of much social-scientific inquiry this century, much of our understanding of its significance is dominated by a small number of high-profile studies of very particular streets. In this well-rehearsed tour, 'in the company of Walter Benjamin, Le Corbusier, Jane Jacobs and Mike Davis, the reader is taken down the broad boulevards and high speed expressways, through communities where residents participate in "daily street ballets" and on to "mean streets" where an underclass fight for survival' (Fyfe, 1998: 2). The problem with such narratives is that they are tied to 'an extremely narrow range of historical, geographical and cultural settings' (Fyfe, 1998: 4), and tell us little about the spatial and social significances of streets as retail spaces. Apart from the narrow polarities between 'high street' and 'out of town' which coloured much early writing about retail change, few commentators had much to say about the street as a retail and consumption site until quite recently (although see Jackson, 1988, on the politics of street carnival).

Crewe and Lowe (1995) have considered the ways in which pioneering retailers create differentiated spaces of consumption through locational preferences based around questions of image and identity rather than narrow economically driven criteria. Others have addressed streets of style in central London, looking at the ways in which international fashion designers such as Armani, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger have located and expanded their presence in central London, primarily along Bond Street and Sloane Street in the Knightsbridge and Mayfair districts of the city, building on the media and government discourses surrounding cool Britannia, Britpop and the re-emergence of London as the chic global city (Creative Industries Task Force, 1997; Fernie *et al.*, 1997; 1998; Moore, 1997; 1998).

New work is also beginning to look at how particular streets and urban quarters become bound up with particular kinds of nostalgia, longing and memory within the popular imagination, including how, for example, the streets of 'swinging London' in the 1960s such as Carnaby Street and the Kings Road are reimagined and reappropriated under new versions of cool Britannia, and at why certain stores such as Biba and Mary Quant's Bazaar conjure up such strong and historically rooted memories (Tucker, 1998; Gregson *et al.*, 2001; Rycroft, 2000).

Finally, there is a growing interest in the connections between 'the street' and the catwalk as repositories of design and style talent, and at how processes of upwards and downwards diffusion between the two might work out through contemporary

consumption trajectories (Ash, 1992; Polhemus, 1995; 1996; Purvis, 1996; Finklestein, 1997).

3 Inconspicuous consumption spaces

More recently, and in an attempt to extend the hitherto spatially narrow field of retailing studies both theoretically and empirically, a range of unconventional spaces and practices have been recast as legitimate areas of study. This has enabled the acknowledgement of the relationality of retail spaces and has revealed the multivalent, plural nature of consumption. Increasing attention is being paid to the ways in which particular spaces are centrally implicated in processes of identity formation, and at how consumers display complex, multiple and often contradictory consumption imperatives. Particularly significant here, and as part of the reshaping of the contours of acceptable objects of study, is the breaking down of the artificial analytical distinctions between 'public' (the high street, the mall, the departments store) and 'private' consumption spaces (the home, the garden). Rather, 'through active and everyday social relations, shopping and its ... meaning is negotiated in different ways, at different times, in different places and spaces' (Bailey, 1998: 21).

The particular inconspicuous retailing and consumption spaces which are being brought into view here are those which have been hitherto deemed 'marginal', either spatially or economically. Thus, new work on car-boot sales, charity shops and retro-vintage clothes shops is revealing the ways in the second-hand market works as a retailing and consumption space (Crewe and Gregson, 1998; Gregson and Crewe, 1997; 1998; *Loot*, 1999; Gregson *et al.*, 1997; 2001). In particular, this work looks at questions of performance, discernment, distinction and the spectacular in consumption practices; at questions of value, authenticity and the genuine; and at ideas surrounding the partial reappropriation of historical styles and their reworking and reincorporation in different contemporary contexts (Gregson *et al.*, 2001).

4 The home and gendered knowledges

Finally, and again as part of the broadening of the boundaries of accepted fields of study within retailing and consumption work, there has been a re-examination and reclamation of the home and domestic space as a key consumption site (Domosh, 1998). A range of studies have questioned the creative dimensions of domestic consumption and the ways in which consumer goods are actively appropriated in the everyday spaces of the home.

One strand of inquiry has interrogated the question of window shopping at home, looking particularly at the role of catalogues, classified ads and Tupperware (Clarke, 1997; and see *Loot*, 1999). Clarke, for example, has considered the localized classified ads paper *Loot* and the national catalogue Argos and argues that both reveal a shared aesthetic appeal to social groups precluded from expensive high-street shopping. Importantly too, though, is the way in which such questions of thrift and utility are mediated by questions of knowledge, authenticity, skill and knowledge. As Clarke (1997: 78–79) argues:

finding a bargain among an array of unseen goods whose product specifications are described by the . . . vendor rather than through the distancing of formalised advertising and marketing terms requires considerable skill, risk and time . . . the mismatch in skill and knowledge of purchaser and vendor create the ambiguity of an unregulated marketplace, and the potential for bargains as well as disappointments.

With the rise of new technologies such as the Internet and cable television, there seems to be scope for more detailed explorations into innovative forms of shopping within the home, including cybershops and virtual shopping (Graham, 1998; Kitchin, 1998; Leyshon and Thrift, 1998). Linked to this, the growth in dual-income career households with high levels of economic capital but little time has captured marketers' imaginations and has resulted in the dramatic growth of 'specialogues' such as Kingshill, Mini Boden and Racing Green. Such niche market (and often up-market) catalogues have gone a long way towards revamping the tired image of conventional mail order catalogues and opened up new lines of inquiry into the consumption motivations of those who use the home as a shopping space (see here also recent work on lifestyle projects (Chaney, 1996) and new forms of masculinity and femininity exposed through the reading of men's and women's magazines (Hermes, 1995; Jackson *et al.*, 1999)).

A second important strand within the home-as-consumption-site literature is the growing body of work on food. Anne Murcott has addressed the ways in which food and cooking sustain and transform gender relations within the household and looks more broadly at the symbolic meanings of food consumption within the home (Murcott, 1993; 1995; 1998). These findings are echoed by a range of other commentators who all acknowledge the ways in which food articulates social relations within the household through the dialectic of creativity and constraint in food provisioning (Douglas, 1970; 1986; Charles and Kerr, 1988; Lupton, 1994; Bell and Valentine, 1997; Warde, 1999).

What is interesting about these home-based food consumption studies is the ways in which they simultaneously deal with the symbolic aspects of domestic consumption *and* the structural and material parameters within which consumers operate and meanings are made (Jackson and Moores, 1995: 7). Food consumption and the cultural meanings it produces are embedded within hierarchies of household power relations, in which gender divisions of labour are continually being renegotiated and reworked, all within the broader context of an economics of domestic consumption.

More broadly, the rich meanings around food and the family are revealing a great deal about current articulations of subjectivity and belonging, such that 'food and eating may serve to embody and render fleshy the neat abstraction of the citizen' (Probyn, 1998: 161). The privileging of the family as a site of consumption is consolidating the basis for what Probyn calls the 'familial citizen', whilst at the same time raising broader concerns about the connections food forges between the nation, the family and the citizen.

Finally, there is a new body of work looking at processes of home making. The household furnishing sector in particular has emerged as an increasingly visible presence within UK and North American retailing and consumption geographies (Molotch, 1996; Scott, 1996; Leslie and Reimer, 1999). Manifested through the launch of new magazines such as *Wallpaper* and *Elle Decoration*, through new and revamped furnishing outlets such as Ikea and Habitat and through new interior 'make-over' television programmes such as 'Changing rooms' in the UK, a range of projects are looking at home-making as a source of creativity, reflexivity and transformation as well

as a site for performance and the reworking of social (and particularly gender) relations (Lofgren, 1990; Forty, 1995; Ritson *et al.*, 1996; Corrigan, 1997; Hinchcliffe, 1997; Usherwood, 1997; Gregson and Crewe, 1998).

III Rituals of possession

Here, then, we have the beginnings of the much-needed fusion of materialist analyses with more culturally derived approaches. One particularly welcome outcome of this focus on unconventional consumption spaces is that it enables us to conceptualize consumption as an ongoing process rather than a momentary act of purchase. One of the unintended consequences of the current focus on food within retailing and consumption literature is that it forces us to limit conceptualizations of consumption to the first cycle. But when we extend our vision to include other commodities, such as clothes, books and furniture, it soon becomes apparent that cycles of consumption and exchange extend far beyond the point of purchase. By tracking products through various cycles of use and reuse it is possible to provide a corrective to those accounts which prioritize single acts of exchange at formal sites of consumption.

Commodities have consumption histories and geographies just as much as production histories and the failure to recognize the existence of a massive second-hand market which acknowledges that artifacts have a use-value and an exchange-value long after their initial purchasers see a need for them is a major flaw in current work. Simply stated, the single act of purchase is just one component in the process of consuming and any reconstructed view of the consumer must take on board the argument that people don't just buy passively or uncritically but transform the meanings of bought goods, appropriating and recontextualizing mass market styles (Willis, 1990).

While McCracken (1985; 1988) is noticeable for drawing attention to the time consumers spend 'cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off and even photographing many of the new possessions' (1985), little ethnographic or qualitative research has been reported on what people actually do with their purchases, on how they transform their commodities through repair, restoration or alteration and on how they display or dispose of their possessions through, for example, gift giving or resale (although see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Moorehouse, 1991; Clarke, 1997; Schrift, 1997; Crewe and Gregson, 1998). Given that the meaning of goods is constantly in transit, it is important that research attention is focused on the ways in which meanings are 'unhooked' and transferred, and how consumers construct the meanings of goods or change the value of commodities (Belk, 1995).

One way into this is to explore rituals of consumption and to focus on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of exchange rather than simply quantifying the material worth of a commodity transaction. The work of Appadurai (1986: 3) provides a useful starting point for such an exploration, as he explains how 'we should look at the commodity potential of all things . . . [which] lies in the extent to which the social life of things can be defined by its exchangeability (past, present or future) for some other things'. Others have considered the role which property and possessions play in self-definition (Schouten, 1991; Belk, 1992), looking particularly at the possession rituals necessitated by second-hand consumption (McRobbie, 1989; Crewe and Gregson, 1998; Gregson and Crewe, 1998) and at questions of knowledge and skill in second-hand

consumption (Clarke, 1997; Gregson and Crewe, 1997). In many cases the items undergo time-consuming divestment rituals, including cleaning, repairing and altering, all with a view to expunging all traces of an unknown other. It thereby becomes possible to transfer, obscure, lose or re-enchant the meanings of commodities as they pass through endless cycles of use and reuse.

IV Commodity chains, cycles and systems

1 Food, flowers, fruit and fashion

Just as many commentators are looking forwards, beyond the point of purchase and towards what consumers actually do with their commodities, so others are looking backwards towards the labour practices and social relations of production which underpin systems of retail provision and consumption. Of particular importance has been a focus on commodity chains or systems of provision, which examines retailing and consumption from the vantage point of one commodity and tracks back the various nodes within the production–consumption nexus, looking at a tissue of sites and demonstrating the mutual interdependence of different nodes within the circuit (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Hartwick, 1998; Leslie and Reimer, 1999).

Early work on commodity chains focused on buyer–supplier relations, primarily in the fashion and food sectors (Crewe and Davenport, 1992; Arce and Marsden, 1993; Crewe and Forster, 1993; Foord *et al.*, 1996; Shackleton, 1998; Doel, 1999; Hughes, 1996; 1999). This work explored the ways in which new modes of supplier organization were being instituted, centring around the preferred supplier model which was typically founded on complex and spatially extensive networks of firms which ensured that retailers such as Marks & Spencer, Next and Nike retain control and flexibility. (Donaghu and Barff, 1990; Crewe and Davenport, 1992; Gereffi *et al.*, 1994). Other studies explored how networks of embedded firms are offering the potential for more equitable relations between retailers and suppliers, through the sharing of knowledge, market intelligence and labour (Crewe, 1996; Scott, 1996; Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998).

The study of commodity chains owes a great deal to Ben Fine's work on systems of provision, which he defines (1993: 600) as 'the commodity-specific chain connecting production, distribution, marketing and consumption and the material culture surrounding these elements'. The importance of this approach is that it points to the possibility of 'a more balanced treatment of the relationship between production and consumption' (Leslie and Reimer, 1999: 402), one which also acknowledges the symbolic significance of commodities.

A key component within much of the commodity chain literature has been the 'unveiling' (or, perhaps more accurately, rediscovery) of production relations in order to expose the ways in which retailing and consumption are implicitly shaped by, and dependent on, power relations and regimes of exploitation, illusion and exclusion (Miller and Rose, 1997). To date, most analyses of global commodity chains have focused upon food systems, initially looking at the globalizing tendencies resulting from global corporations such as McDonald's (Ritzer, 1998; see also Bryman, 1999). More recently such debates have been refined and have taken a more nuanced look at the ways in which processes of globalization impact on food production processes and

how global processes are mediated and refracted by regional and local specificities (Goodman, 1991; Bonanno *et al.*, 1994; Whatmore, 1994; Goodman and Watts, 1994; 1997; Lien, 1998; Murdoch and Miele, 1998). Others have focused on specific food commodities such as exotic fruits (Cook, 1994; Crang, 1996; James, 1996; May, 1996; Cook and Crang, 1996; 1998; Mather, 1998; Cooke *et al.*, 2000) and coffee (Smith, 1996), looking particularly here at the ways terms such as 'authentic' and 'original' can be 'deconstructed as mere moments in an ongoing process of incorporation, reworking and redefinition' (Bell and Valentine, 1997: 192).

Cook and Crang (1996) explore the ways in which geographical knowledges about products invoke a 'double commodity fetishism', incorporating certain ignorances about how, why and where products are produced, along with certain assumed knowledges about those origins (see also Crang's discussion of displacement and consumption, 1996). Such impartial knowledges imply that the authority of the consumer is enfeebled in the face of complex global circuits of culinary culture.

In addition to the untangling of global food chains, a range of studies have endeavoured to unravel the production chains underpinning contemporary retailing and consumption by fusing geographies of consumption approaches with materialist commodity chain analyses. Hughes (1998) and Barrett *et al.* (1998) have looked at the production sites, labour processes, marketing chains and retail systems involved in the horticultural, and especially, cut-flower trade, focusing specifically at links between Kenyan suppliers and UK supermarkets. Others have focused on the fashion industry, looking for example at the global expansion of Benetton, Paul Smith and The Gap (Belussi 1992; Crewe and Lowe, 1996; Marston, 1998; Crewe and Goodrum, 1999), at wearing Britishness abroad and at designing the fashionable body politic in organizations such as Mulberry (Goodrum, 1998).

A range of studies have looked at the global footwear industry, exposing for example, how the basketball player Michael Jordan receives US\$20 million per year to endorse Nike, how the chief executive of Nike is worth US\$5.4 billion, while Indonesian workers are paid US\$2.40 per day to make the training shoes which retail for up to £100 in the UK (Donaghu and Barff, 1990; Korzeniewicz, 1994; Chan 1996; Sanders and Kaptur, 1997; Hartwick, 1998).

Finally, a range of studies have revealed the exploitative social relations involved in the production of goods for high street fashion retailers, with east London manufacturers receiving £2.50 for coats which sell for £69 in C&A, and Marks & Spencer allegedly renegeing on its 'buy British policy' through an aggressive international sourcing campaign. While the majority of the UK population continue to wear Marks & Spencer pants, few, it would seem, realize they are more likely to have been produced in Morocco (where wages are in the region of £1.20/hour) than in the midlands (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Phizaklea, 1990; Crewe and Davenport, 1992; McRobbie, 1998).

2 New interventions: governing the economies of retailing and consumption

Such studies are pointing the way towards a new politics of consumption which questions the ability of consumers to act as agents for social change within a global commodity system. As Miller and Rose (1997: 2) explain, current moves towards more sustainable and ethical forms of production and consumption are increasingly meaning

that 'the regime of consuming subjectivities is to be the target of a critique, its contradictions exposed, the hidden costs – individual, political and cultural – of its surface pleasures revealed' (see also Qualter, 1991; Langman, 1992). As such, it would seem that commodity chain analyses provide a space for political action by reconnecting producers and consumers.

To date, much of the work on global commodity chains has raised serious concerns about the ability of consumers to mobilize their actions and make their voices heard. Work on *The Body Shop* suggests that an entrepreneurial politics of 'profits with principles' simply enables endless diversion and self-glorification, a kind of conscience soother for the new middle classes (Kaplan, 1995, quoted in Hartwick, 1998). Marsden (1998) similarly argues that the scope for alternative food provisioning systems such as organic farming is marginalized in the face of global commodity flows and the power of big retailers. And again 'Emberley's critique of the Lynx media campaign against women wearing fur likewise suggests the potential for a simulated politics of representation that merely pretends to popular struggle' (Hartwick, 1998: 433).

But other work is suggesting at least the possibility for new forms of more ethical retailing and consumption. It would seem that the more highly regulated and bureaucratically ordered the dominant regime becomes, the greater the tendency for resistance, for the creation of spaces which subvert or transgress the monotony of the high street and the intolerable mark-ups in British supermarkets. Work on a range of 'unconventional spaces', and particularly here second-hand spaces such as charity shops and retro/vintage shops, is revealing the importance of commodity recycling, ethical consumption practices and consumption motivations centring around notions of thrift and the bargain (Gregson *et al.*, 2001). What is becoming particularly clear here is the ways in which second-hand spaces provide 'new ways of inciting and regulating emotional economies, relations of identification and forms of sociality' (Miller and Rose, 1997: 32), forms which are increasingly based around fun, pleasure and performance.

V Love and value

There has been a tendency in recent consumption studies to simplify or ignore exchange relations and to portray both commodification and monetary exchange in 'abstract, universalistic hues' (Crang, 1996: 50). The general, nonanthropological view of exchange is that it is essentially market-like and is always rational and profit-motivated. The simplifications which result from such narrowly economic models of exchange are clear to see, and relate to an inability to theorize the richness and messiness of the exchange process. As Leiss (1986: 225) argues, 'Consumers . . . do not form their tastes and preferences in the private bliss of rationalisation and then descend upon innocent merchants to scrutinize their shelves with cold and wary eyes . . . consuming [rather] is an elaborate social game'. The assumption that western 'developed' exchanges are thinner, less loaded with social meaning and less symbolic than traditional systems in part explains why issues of exchange have not been taken more seriously within consumption studies (Miller, 1995). Yet a range of studies are now confirming that contemporary exchange is seldom an 'unembedded' material commodity transaction. Rather, it is a richly symbolic activity which can have

important emotional consequences quite apart from any material changes which may result. Thus, Danny Miller, in his *A theory of shopping* (1998), sees commodities as the material culture of love and argues that far from being an expression of individualistic greed and hedonism, shopping is, in fact, a ritual practice orientated to others. It is about making love. Quite unlike earlier accounts of shopping which have been 'a mixture of the dismissive and the functional, the former when consideration is given to the shopper and the latter when consideration is given to retailing' (1998: 112), Miller here argues that shopping is a ritualistic process, one which involves the creation of value. In resisting the tendency to use shopping as a motif in generalizing about the *Zeitgeist* or to symbolize social distinctions, Miller reveals the rich and complex social relations which underpin consumption, social relations based upon love and devotion, be they the 'love as partnership' relations within north London households or the sheer subsumption of the individual within devotional relationships such as early courtship or parenting (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Miller, 1997; 1998).

Linked to this has been a body of work looking at questions of gifting and at the symbolic and material significance of rituals such as Christmas and birthdays (Bourdieu, 1987; Miller, 1993; Belk, 1992; 1996; Thrift and Olds, 1996; Schrift, 1997). Such work provides insights into the ways in which gift giving comprises both altruism and egoism, and how it is simultaneously a form of exchange and social communication (Strathern, 1988). The major characteristic of the gift, Bourdieu (1987; 231) argues, is its ambiguity: on the one hand it is experienced (or intended) as a refusal of self-interest and egoistic calculation, and an exaltation of generosity – a gratuitous, unrequired gift. On the other hand it never entirely excludes . . . its constraining and costly character . . . This leads to the question of the dual truth of the gift.'

What seems to be clear from the above résumé is the sheer breadth of the field of study – it becomes difficult at times to plough through the enormity of material. Consumer culture, it seems, 'is rediscovered every few decades; or, to be uncharitable, it has been redesigned, repackaged and relaunched as a new academic or political project every decade since the sixteenth century' (Slater, 1997: 1). What seems to me to be the most significant about the current 'rediscovery' of retailing and consumption is, first, that it is characterized by a shift from a marketing and mapping approach towards an anthropological methodology. Such an anthropological turn, centring around ethnographic approaches, participant observation and field diaries promises at least the potential for a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the social significance of contemporary consumption practices.

Secondly, recent work is characterized by a shift away from studying the grand and the spectacular (in the form of mega-malls and superstore giants) towards looking at the seemingly more mundane and everyday worlds of the street, the home and the jumble sale. But what is interesting here is the very real sense in which these 'everyday spaces', seemingly so ordinary and for so long overlooked, are in many ways other-worldly and transgressive. Having felt 'at home' for so long in the spaces of the mall and the flagship designer fashion store, my tentative early forays into the space of the car-boot sale, with all the noise, dirt and hidden languages and codes, were indeed trips into another world, a world which is every bit as exotic and spectacular as the grand spaces of formal retailing with their now well rehearsed and predictable product mixes and store designs.

Finally, what strikes me as being particularly significant about recent work in the

field is the ways in which the very boundaries of the area of study are being questioned and at times transgressed. So while there has been a concentration on food and fashion retailing within the literature, new work is venturing into as yet uncharted territories and developing quite sophisticated accounts of, for example, the relations between fashion, consumption, food and the body.

Within the fashion retailing and consumption literature, then, emergent foci for study include how certain retail formats are addressing the need to clothe stylishly the pregnant body, the outsize body and the old body (Bruzzi and Church-Gibson, 1999). Meanwhile work on food is expanding to include questions of disease, dirt and dung. Quite how such topics come to be defined as the subject of retailing and consumption remains the focus for my next report.

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