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CONSUMPTION AND SHOPPING

Introduction

Not so long ago, consumption was an academic outcast, rarely mentioned except in passing by any but a few authors who had usually stumbled across the work of writers such as Simmel and Veblen. Then came a period of expansion which, not entirely accidentally, coincided with a major consumer boom in many countries around the world. This period of expansion produced a number of canonical studies —works such as Douglas and Isherwood's *TheWorld of Goods* (1979), McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb's *The Birth of aConsumer Society* (1982), Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Miller's *Mass Consumption and Material Culture* (1987), and Campbell's *The RomanticEthic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987)—which became the intellectual basis of the study of consumption. Diverse as these works were in character and style, they all agreed on three things: first, the paucity of theoretical or empirical research on consumption; second, the diversity of the social relations involved in consumption which made the category into, at best, a catch-all and, at worst, a confusion; and third, the need to consider consumption through many different kinds of social relations: gender, kinship, ethnicity, age, locality, and so on.

We are now faced with the fruits of a first generation of empirical studies of consumption, all the way from collecting to car boot sales and from catalogue shopping to party selling (Clarke 1997; Crewe and Gregson 1997), and with a profusion of theoretical frameworks, all the way from psychoanalysis to pragmatism (Bocock 1993). The problem is no longer that consumption is an unknown topic but that it is, in some senses, known too well: the unorthodox has become a new orthodoxy with all the problems that entails.

Of course, this trajectory is hardly unique. A number of other recent academic subcultures have followed much the same path, for example media studies and the sociology of scientific knowledge. Academic subcultures like these can even be characterised in some of the same ways as the study of consumption. They are fundamentally interdisciplinary. They are unsure of their exact focus; therefore they debate endlessly their central terms. And they have come to be seen as

particularly concerned with different kinds of knowledge and with the nature of the object.

How, then, can we understand modern consumption studies, and, most especially, the place of shopping as a crucial element of such studies? This chapter is a critical review of work in this field. To this end, it is in four sections. The first is a brief history of the study of consumption in three stages, highlighting the issues raised by each stage of work. The second then considers shopping itself. Here, the concern is both with the sheer diversity of approaches to shopping that are possible and with beginning to develop the framework which informs the work in this book. The third section then considers the issues of place and identity as vital determinants of modern consumption. In the final section, the four different threads of consumption, shopping, place and identity are brought together again through a consideration of the literature on shopping malls.

A brief history of the study of consumption

Writing a brief history of modern work on consumption is not easy. Studies of consumption have taken diverse approaches to an almost bewildering set of topics, all set within a number of disciplinary frames, each with their own procedures and protocols (Miller 1995). This section identifies three main stages of work, a first stage which covers the period from the 1960s to the late 1970s; a second stage which covers the period from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s; and a third stage which covers the most recent period of time. As with all such chronicles, this one is necessarily rough and ready.

The first stage

Let us begin by harking back to the early days of research on consumption. Why did 'consumption' become a rallying call for so many researchers? Four main reasons come to mind. First, a whole new landscape of consumption was coming into view: not just the supermarket (in Britain chiefly a product of the 1960s) but the retail warehouse park and the shopping mall (of which Brent Cross was the first real British example). Second, there was the implicit opposition to production. Consumption could therefore stand for many things—as an implicit critique of what were perceived to be productionist approaches (such as in Marxism); as the mark of a shift in the nature of production towards new times; or as an index of the decline of production-based working-class cultures and the rise of consumption-based middle-class cultures. Third, and relatedly, consumption was a way of gently introducing concerns about culture into social sciences still often dominated by approaches based on political economy. After all, consumption was still recognisably 'economic', wasn't it? Fourth, consumption, and especially advertising, provided a playground of interpretation for intellectuals in the humanities who, through the medium of cultural studies, were moving into the social sciences. These concerns of the humanities came together most obviously in

the work on subcultures which were often identified with and through particular consumer objects (Willis 1975; Hebdige 1979).

The second stage

The second stage was one in which the study of consumption came to take on its own independent dynamic, becoming a recognisable subfield of a number of disciplines. Independence was declared in a number of ways.

First, consumption was cast adrift from production. Consumption became a world of its own, bolstered especially by the work of Bourdieu and de Certeau who became the all-purpose patron saints of consumption, with Bourdieu's (1984) consumer categorisations ameliorated by de Certeau's (1986) emphasis on amorphous, dynamic and flexible consumer 'tactics'.

Second, consumption became deeply implicated in discussions of the construction of subjectivity, most especially the construction of self and identity (Willis 1991; Nava 1992). Using a variety of theoretical frameworks, from social constructionism to psychoanalysis, consumer objects could be positioned as key elements of the construction of a whole range of selves and identities and most especially sexual and ethnic identities (Wilson 1992; Reekie 1993; Jackson 1994; Swanson 1995).

Third, practices which could legitimately be regarded as aspects of consumption proliferated. Consumption came to include practices like consumer festivals (Miller 1993), collecting (Belk 1995), catalogue shopping, new age shopping, and the like.

Fourth, an accepted natural history of consumption took shape which, identifying consumption as a key characteristic of modernity, described an arc from the arcades and department stores of Paris through to the shopping malls of the United States. Most specifically, consumption was interpreted as a part of the specular moment of modernity (Bowlby 1993; Pred 1995). Vision becomes the key sense because western societies are characterised by an excess of display which has the effect of concealing the truth of the society that produces it, providing the consumer with an endless supply of images that can be understood as either detached from the real world of real things—as Debord (1966) implies—or as simply working to efface any trace of the symbolic, condemning the consumer to a world in which everything can be seen but nothing can be understood (Cooke and Wollen 1995). The connections to the masculine gaze were quickly made (Bowlby 1985).

Then, fifth and finally, the study of consumption becomes increasingly integrated with and tied to spaces and places. In line with a general increase in interest in space and spatial metaphors, more and more attention was paid to particular consumption spaces which were no longer seen as just passive backdrops but as spaces with their own properties which could intervene in the construction of difference. These spaces could therefore be studied for their

own sake and not just as examples of more general processes (Glennie and Thrift 1992).

These five articles of a newly independent constitution formed the core of research into consumption in the second stage. However, like all such articles, they have proved open to revision. These revisions have formed the substance of the third stage. In this third stage, what we see is a growth in work on consumption, a parallel extension of work on consumption into new areas and, not surprisingly, the growth of doubts about previous writings on consumption as the results of this new research are digested.

The third stage

As in the second stage, there are five main issues. The first is, perhaps surprisingly, production and distribution. Many commentators feel that second-stage writings too often ignored the role of production and distribution, leading to both a lack of emphasis on the role of producers and distributors and an equal lack of emphasis on the role of consumers' choices on producers and distributors. Two particular illustrations of these lacunae are in order. First, there is the role of the workforce in shops and stores—from sales assistants to security staff to the managers and administrators, which is widely ignored even though they are an integral part of many forms of consumption. For example, du Gay (1996) shows the way in which sales assistants in one department store negotiated competing pressures from managers (who had become more intent on principles of consumer service), from within the workforce (for example, the fact that 'concessions' staff were able to wear clothes they had chosen themselves while all other staff had to wear uniforms was a source of friction) and from more and more demanding consumers. For many sales staff the increasing emphasis on the consumer had taken place directly at their expense, by providing them with less and less latitude at work. In turn, this diminished their sense of 'ownership' of the store:

> We're us and they're them, yeah. What they don't seem to understand is that we're customers too. We go shopping too. It's almost like they think we're slaves. We don't leave here but go into a little corner where there's beds and we go to sleep there and get up the next morning and come out in the shop… There's no idea amongst the customers that we're just at work.
>
> (shop assistant cited in du Gay, 1996:160)

At the same time, the emphasis on the sovereign consumer has, if anything, made the 'face work' of sales skills more important in many retail organisations, leading to more and more systematic attempts to inculcate such skills into the workforce, a development which, to an extent at least, the workforce often 'resists', for example through 'backstage' irony and mockery (Crang 1995; Crewe and Lowe 1996). Then, second, there are the major organisational changes going on in certain parts of the economy which are leading to greater and greater 'demand pull' (Lowe and

Wrigley 1996). In particular, in countries like Britain and the United States, retailers have often become more and more powerful at the expense of producers.[1] In turn, this new relationship means that consumers are more able to directly register their changing preferences on producers which, in turn, have to rapidly adjust their output. For example, Cook and Crang (1996) show how Euro-American consumer preferences for exotic fruits have in turn produced far-reaching effects on producers in the countries that export these fruits (see also the papers in Howes 1996).

Another concern of the third stage is the emphasis on not just the consuming subject but also on the consumer object in the belief that 'taking artefacts, images and performances as quasi-texts is to overlook their most fundamental properties so far as users and witnesses might be concerned' *(Journal of MaterialCulture* 1996:8). What exactly is the relationship of the subject and object in consumption? There are a number of views of how this 'in-between' relationship might be framed so as to produce a better sense of the object world. In one of these, which follows the work of Merleau-Ponty, the intention is to formulate a phenomenological knowledge which mobilises notions such as 'the flesh' and a metaphorics of touch in an attempt to capture the intimate, sensual aspect of the subject-object relationship (Game 1991; Grosz 1994). In practice, this means concentrating in particular on the different mediations through which the subject experiences the object, and vice versa. In another view, which follows the work of Benjamin, subject and object are confounded by a tacit, everyday knowledge: 'the tasks facing the perceptual opportunities at turning points in history, cannot be asserted, be solved by…contemplative means but only gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation' (Taussig 1992:12). In particular, Benjamin was concerned with understanding the new forms of tactility that were swarming over the visual register as a result of the invention of photography and film. One other view is so-called actor-network theory—here the subject and object are co-produced in heterogeneous networks. Or, as, Callon and Law (1995:501) put it, 'there isn't a reality on the one hand, and a representation of that reality on the other. Rather, there are chains of translations. Chains of translation of varying lengths. And varying kinds. Chains which link things to texts to things, and things to people, and so on.' Then, in one more view, there is a more general emphasis on 'material culture' which argues that the current dichotomy in Western societies between persons and things is historically and geographically transient and which, by drawing on diverse anthropological and historical evidence, has attempted to move beyond what is still a pervasive humanism.

A third concern has been with the constitution of subjectivity. This concern has been generated by a series of related puzzles that arise out of work which, in the second stage, too easily and unproblematically assigned consumer objects to subjects, in part because of an overdetermination of social categories such as class and status (Mort 1996). This concern might be framed as three different questions about how consumer objects produce subjects. There is, to begin with, the question of what might be termed 'singularity'. How is it that 'the range of specificities that

we may inhabit comes together in singularity' (Probyn 1996:24). Consumer objects clearly have a crucial role in producing the singular person and space.

Then there is the problem of ascribing general meaning to consumer objects, when the meanings are always worked out *performatively,* according to situations that pertain in quite specific spaces and times, situations which are often constrained in terms of the kinds of meanings they make possible or visible. Thus, for example,

> material objects are clearly implicated developmentally in the creation or maintenance of a sense of self. Yet it is hard to argue that the importance of a cuddly toy or comfort blanket for an infant derives from the communally printed image. It is especially difficult to suggest that the reasons why an old person may treasure family photographs is because of the symbolism (if there is any) attached to photograph albums themselves.
>
> (Campbell 1996:103)

And there is also the problem of 'rationality'. It is still often assumed that consumers make definite choices as a result of discrete actions, even in postmodernist accounts (Campbell 1996). This assumption often underlies even the work of those who realise the problematic nature of this depiction. Thus many commentators smuggle a rational account back in, for example by adopting a distinction between habit and conscious choice (Campbell 1994, 1996).

Thus, what is now transpiring might be called a more practical approach to consumption, one which is based in a notion of everyday consumption practices as 'basically repetitive, intuitive *and* inventive' (Hermes 1993:497). Such a notion displaces the vocabulary of rationality, choice, and representation by a vocabulary of joint action and embodiment (Thrift 1996). Thus consumption is seen as a practical-moral and contextually specific activity, rather than an intellectualised and abstract system of knowledge, which results from the intersection of numerous actor-networks.

A fourth concern has been with the history of consumption, precisely as a reaction to a standard history of consumption which intertwines it with a history of modernity. As historians have become increasingly interested in consumption so they have overturned a number of the assumptions associated with the standard history. Two corrections have been particularly important. Chronologically there has been enough work now on seventeenth-, eighteenth and nineteenth-century consumption in Europe and North America to push back the borders of what can be regarded as 'modern consumption' practices to the early eighteenth century, or even the late seventeenth century. In turn, many apparently novel consumer practices have been shown to have deep historical roots. For example, one of the reasons why department stores come late to Britain is because of the extraordinarily sophisticated history of shops and shopping that predated them (Glennie and Thrift 1996). Second, the sheer variation in ways of consuming has been demonstrated which, combined with anthropological evidence, raises doubts

over the possibility of any definitive history of 'modern' consumption. For example, British and North American consumption have been shown to have very different roots involving a much greater degree of standardisation of North American goods from an early point in time (Glennie 1995).

A fifth and continuing concern has been with space and place. In particular, space and place are seen as crucial elements of consumer *identities*. For example, Mort argues that space was not incidental but central to the constitution of a new gay consumer market, and to gay identities:

> Judged by their own standards of entrepreneurship the attempts to forge a new market for young men and their goods in the 1980s were an undisputed success. In the face of the later economic downturn, the commodities which sought to speak to men thorough their gender expanded rather than contracted. Consumer journalism, clothing, toiletries, together with a plethora of other personal objects, continued to display the characteristic imprint of the new formula. Likewise, those zones of the city which provided the settings for the associated consumption rituals proliferated. London, along with most of the other Western metropolitan centres, has a burgeoning homosexual quarter, where commerce, community and sexual politics exist alongside more mainstream practices of city life. There has been no closing down of these projects. The commercial experiments in masculinity appear to have been long-term, not merely transient.
>
> (Mort 1996:204–5)

Going shopping

Ironically, shopping itself has only rarely been the focus of work in consumption in any of these three stages; commentators on consumption have rarely paid much attention to shopping. Even studies of department stores and shopping malls devote remarkably little attention to the cultural practices of shopping. Instead these practices are subsumed into a more general interest in an overarching activity called consumption. The shopper therefore nearly always figures as a sign for something else. This book takes the opposite tack. Our concern is with what shoppers do and what they understand as 'shopping'. What succour can we take from the available literature? Notwithstanding the general neglect of shopping, six main accounts can be identified.[2]

The first of these might be termed 'the commodity regnant'. In this account, shopping figures as an index of the imminent or actual decay of Western civilisation resulting from commodification. In their different ways, both Baudrillard and Bauman see shopping as a form of seduction by the commodity calculus; empty games for empty people; the *flâneur* turned into just another shopper:

> The right to look gratuitously was to be the flâneur's, tomorrow's *customer's,* reward. Pleasurable display, fascinating view, the enticing game of shapes and colours…bought through the seduction of the flâneur; the flâneur, through seduction, was transformed into the consumer. In the process, the miraculous avator of the commodity into the shopper is accomplished. At the end of the day the dividing line has been blurred. It is no more clear what (who) is the object of consumption, who (what) is the consumer.
>
> (Bauman, 1993:173–4)

A less hysterical and more innovative version of this account is provided by Bowlby (1993). For her, shopping is both the first and last sign of the expansion of the commercial sphere into everyday life: 'all the world's a showroom, every man or woman an advertisement for himself or herself, aiming to "impress" and please his or her consumers' (Bowlby 1993:95). Thus, Bowlby provides a blow-by-blow account of the drama of the sale, and questions whether discourses of the self have been infected by the drama:

> There is an intimate connection, institutionally and intellectually, between psychology and marketing during the first forty years of this century and beyond. As psychology became separated off from philosophy on the one hand and neurology on the other as an independent discipline, the primary questions it was concerned with were often identical to those that preoccupied advertisers who wanted to know how people acted in order to know what would get them to buy.
>
> (Bowlby 1993:114)

Even Freud's writing shows traces of this motivation. Ironically, given Freud's disdain for consumer society, especially in the shape of the United States,[3] 'I shop, therefore I am' seems to be a slogan that is less far from his concerns than might at first be thought:

> Freud's own writings, looked at through the lenses of consumer psychology, might seem to be offering another version of the modern marketing mind. It is a commonplace to talk about the 'economic' model in Freud, but this is never, as far as I have seen, put into relation with either the economics of his time or the psychological preoccupations of that economics in the area of marketing.
>
> (Bowlby 1993:114)

For Bowlby, Freud's writings contain both a logic of the rational psychic operator, a *homo economicus* dealing in a calculus of value, cost and saving and also a logic of comparison shopping and impulse buying:

> There is a drama of attractions and interests, desires and choices, in which minds are forever seeking and forever failing to capture the object that will satisfy their longing once and for all. The choices and wishes of love appear in the same linguistic guise as those of consumption: one of the words used in relation to object-choice, for instance, is the verb *auszeichnen,* which is primarily used for purchasing something in a shop.
>
> (Bowlby 1993:115)

In the second account, shopping is also about the commercial sphere and commercial capitalism, but, in contrast to the account of an all-consuming capitalism, it attends to the diversity of forms of capitalism. The 'new retail geography' finds a messier and more disparate field of action which consists of a spectrum of retailing firms and markets, operating through distinctive geographies of shopping malls, department stores, supermarkets, discount warehouses, corner shops and so on (Wrigley 1991, 1992; Marsden and Wrigley 1996; Wrigley and Lowe 1996). In turn, these geographies offer different kinds of shopping experience and demand different kinds of shopping knowledge. New forms, markets and geographies of shopping are constantly being formed. For example, Lowe and Wrigley (1996) point to the rise of a whole series of new forms of shopping in the last 15 years, including the 'captured market' which consists of sites intended for other purposes which have become shopping opportunities (e.g. airports, railway stations, petrol service stations, hospitals), 'taking consumption to the consumer', as in carefully targeted shopping catalogues and lifestyles magazines, and the 'leisured consumer', which consists of shops centred on leisure themes (e.g. the Disney and Warner Brothers stores, football and rugby club stores). The point about this literature is that it depicts a world of constant tension between producers, retailers and consumers, which is kept in balance by specific regulatory regimes which themselves incorporate particular notions ('rights to produce and consume') of the apposite relationships between producers, retailers and consumers. More than this, the literature ties shopping back to production and in doing so, reminds us of the ethics of shopping.

A third account figures shopping as part of a refocusing of connections between the commodity and post-traditional identity which is incorporated in the notion of 'lifestyle' (Chaney 1996; Shields 1992a). Consumers gather around objects which define their identity and become centrepieces of particular routines of sociability:

> Lifestyles are routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, entry, modes of acting and favoured milieus of encountering others; but the routines are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity. Each of the small decisions a person makes every day…contributes to such routines.
>
> (Giddens 1991:81)

Lifestyle therefore differs from traditional status orders, as well as structural divisions (class, family, gender, ethnicity) and for two reasons (Slater 1997). First, it tends to stress a powerful cultural pattern made up of signs, representations and media. Second, and relatedly, it is inherently unstable since, in a sense, it is an extension of consumer choice to mode of life:

> lifestyle groupings and patterns do not reflect communities with well-policed social gates, with obligations to long-term commitment or to extensive social learning processes. Moreover, lifestyle groups are 'elective communities', memberships which we choose rather than have ascribed or allocated to us. Social membership is reduced to identities one puts on and turns off at whim, a flânerie which moves us beyond even the solidarity of subculture to 'the supermarket of style'.
>
> (Slater 1997:88).

Unlike its subject, the lifestyles literature on consumption can have a rather mechanical feel, often coming perilously close to the kind of consumer categorisations that still bedevil the literature. But it does not have to, as the work of Shields (1992a) attests. Shields constantly stresses the ambivalence that lies at the heart of lifestyle as concept and social practice.

In the fourth account, contemporary shopping is a reflection of a new and more democratic definition of heritage and further evidence of an expanding historical culture. Shopping becomes a part of this expansion of popular memory, as shoppers become Clio's under-labourers and goods become clues and signposts to the past. This expansion of historical culture into shopping can be indexed in a number of ways. There is, first of all, the new visibility of shopping in representations of the material past:

> In pictorial histories (such as those reproduced from old postcards …) pride of place is given to the high street scene. In the mock-ups and pin-ups of the 'traditional' village, the general stores—or village post office—occupy the symbolic spaces once given to the parish church. 'Period' shopping is a leading attraction at the open-air museums and theme parks. At the York Castle Museum, a pioneer in this field, a cobbled Victorian street has been reconstructed, with complete shop fronts reused as architectural salvage… Shops of a more recent vintage are also the centre piece of the open-air and industrial museums. At Beamish visitors are transported from place to place in enamel-encrusted trams. Shop assistants in 1920s costume serve them.
>
> (Samuel 1994:160)

This cultural revisionism extends even to the shopkeeper:

> He is no longer the obsequious figure of nineteenth century caricature, fawning on the carriage trade, nor yet a melancholy Mr Polly, teetering on

> the edge of bankruptcy…nor yet the vulgar commercial of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* but rather, like the old-fashioned draper, an emblem of 'knowledgeable and friendly service'. In the book of sepia photographs, he is a figure of authority, flanked by respectful assistants, and backed by mountains of produce. In the trade catalogues, often reproduced in sepia in recent years, shopkeepers figure, as in Whiteleys of Queensway, as 'universal providers'. In oral history's childhood memories they are fondly remembered as the purveyors of broken biscuits and spotted fruits.
>
> This new version of the national past is not only more democratic than earlier ones but also more feminine and domestic. It privileges the private over the public sphere, and sees people as consumers rather than—or as well as—producers.
>
> (Samuel 1994:161)

A second means of expansion has been the historicizing of consumer goods. Samuel provides a vast inventory of 'historic' fare, ranging from 'traditional' foods through toiletries, china, clothing, music, housing, and even lighting. He finds, for example, one glass factory in Wakefield that is using 'state of the art modern technology to produce traditional old-style uplighters and shades' (Samuel 1994:103). Then third, there is the expansion of sites of memory. There are the carefully manicured centres of historic towns such as Bath, Chester, and Oxford. There are period shopping streets and shopping precincts, full of shops with small paned windows and carefully calligraphed hanging signs. There are the retail chains selling historic goods, such as Past Times, which makes a fetish of the facsimile.[4] And then there are the ubiquitous 'historic' touches to be found in so many shopping areas: Victorian street furniture, mock street lighting and so on.

A fifth account considers shopping predominantly in terms of gender and sexuality. All manner of researchers have noted that gender and sexuality are important aspects of shopping. In terms of gender, the first point to make is the degree to which shopping is equated with women: 'the vast majority of the world's shoppers have been women' (Reekie 1993: xi). Further, from the middle of the nineteenth century, women came to predominate on many shop floors as shop assistants. However, men also have a shopping history. In the nineteenth century, men were a rare find in many shops. For example:

> there is evidence which indicates how women continued to exclude men from the feminine terrain of the department store. The women workers in Marshall Field's were noted for their scornful giggling of men who accompanied their wives in the store. These 'Molly Husbands' suffered both the ridicule of breaking late nineteenth century gender stereotypes and the subtle-tactics of both women customers and workers defending their 'space'…
>
> Many stores appear to have colluded in this process of male exclusion by providing 'Men's shops' with separate access. One Blackpool store even

> went so far as to provide a men's room complete with newspapers, free cigars and coffee.
>
> (Lancaster 1995:182)

Sexuality is an equally important element of this account. There are modes of shopping in which sexuality is a clear element (see, for example, Nead 1997, on a London street famed for pornography), but more generally, shops can be seen to have been responsible for the creation of a series of sexual cultures based around new practices of shopping. For example, Reekie writes of the department store that its significance:

> lies in its implicit management of male and female bodies and sexual relations. New methods of display, advertising, customer surveillance and departmental organisation introduced after the turn of the century ascribed increasingly explicit cultural meanings to male and female bodies. Mass marketing methods also articulated with greater clarity differences between the sexes.
>
> The new sales techniques and knowledges provided unambiguous and frequently tangible models of appropriate modes of heterosocial conduct. Like the superficially rational but deeply sexualised environment of the modern office, department store culture was saturated with the signs of sex. The department store was an institution of everyday culture which touched the lives of every woman who shopped there; hence, its potential to shape popular values and ideas about sex and gender was invaluable. The department store in effect created modern manhood and womanhood and, as a heterosocial space, crucially influenced the ways in which women and men viewed and related to each other as sexes.
>
> (Reekie 1993: xiv)

Similarly, at a later date, shopping has clearly had an important influence on the growth of new sexual relations. Most particularly, men have become more closely involved in shopping:

> the gender of shopping has changed dramatically in the post-war period. The days of the 'Man's Shop', with its discreet separate entrance, have long passed. In the modern post-war period, shop assistants at Brown's told the Mass Observation investigators that they had witnessed an increase in the number of men accompanying their wives on shopping expeditions. The Mintel Survey of 1978, which claimed that ten per cent of all adult men visited a department store at least once a month indicates that male prejudice about shopping was beginning to break down. A visit to any high street or mall on a Saturday visibly demonstrates the growth of male participation in the experience of shopping. Men still insist that the purchase of 'technical'

> products, such as home electrical goods requires their 'expertise'. Men are also reported to be more prone than women to impulse buying.
>
> (Lancaster 1995:202)

This involvement of men in shopping was boosted in the 1980s by the development of what Mort (1996:9) calls 'a commercial language capable of speaking to young men' by the advertising, marketing and retailing industries. In turn, this language was imported into a number of sexual cultures, including those of the burgeoning gay communities. Commodities and the practices of shopping featured as 'recognisable signposts' (Mort 1996:11) through which these new sexual cultures could be enacted.

The sixth account tells of shopping through the eyes of the shop-worker. Shop-workers have tended to be neglected in the literature. For example, Lancaster (1996) could find only four minor studies in Britain on department store labour in the industrial relations literature, although the situation was better with regard to American and French department stores. However, the paucity of material is, to an extent, made up for by the quality of what does exist. There have, for example, been classic studies of department store labour in the 1950s (Woodward 1960) and of the John Lewis Partnership in the 1960s (Flanders et al. 1968). More recently, studies like those of du Gay (1996) have shown the influence on the shopfloor of management theory. Nearly every study conceives of shopping as a constant battle between workforce and consumers; 'over a century, from the tabbies of the late nineteenth century to the foragers in the present-day bargain basement customers and managers have pitted their wits against each other' (Lancaster 1995:169). In particular, wits have been sharpened by shoplifting, which to go back to the previous account, had, and has, a clear gender dimension (Abelson 1989):

> the sexual division of department store life was closely associated with another such phenomenon, shoplifting, an activity that taxed the minds of many Victorian commentators. Pilfering from shops is as old as retailing; but what captured the popular imagination in the second half of the nineteenth century was that much of this crime, especially in larger stores, was committed by middle class women.
>
> (Lancaster 1995:184)

What each of these six accounts show is that shopping is a complex social activity which needs to be treated as such. As Lancaster puts it:

> we need to keep in mind the wide variety of shopping experiences. To take the department store as an example, on any day we confront the bargain-hunter in the basement, the parents buying their children's school clothing, a couple buying white appliances or a television after lengthy research through copies of *Which?,* the browser gazing at expensive designer label clothes,

> women meeting socially in the coffee shop, the children being brought toys… the list is almost endless and warns against simplistic generations.
>
> (Lancaster 1995:169)

In what follows we attempt to outline some of the key principles that underlie our approach, distilled out of the literatures that we have already reviewed, without aiming, at this point, for a hard and fast theoretical stance.

Towards a theoretical framework

First, then, 'shopping' is a term we use to denote a network of activity of which the actual point of purchase of a commodity is but a small part; 'shopping for goods remains a social activity built around social exchange as well as simple commodity exchange' (Shields 1992b: 102). Thus, even at a site of purchase like a shopping mall 'there are pro-forma greetings and salutations, a banal Goffmanesque interaction between scripted roles of shop assistant and shopper—a shopper who may or may not become a purchaser' (Shields 1992b: 102). Then, the sale of any good nearly always requires an extensive infrastructure of relations of production, distribution and marketing which cannot be excluded from it. It also depends upon the intersection of networks of the social with different obligations and objectives which can produce very different stances towards the same goods. Finally, it always involves a process of 'translation' as the product is taken home and sieved through the varied cultural milieu which give these objects their social meaning (Miller 1987). Thus:

> as a consequence of consumption work, consumption cannot simply be reduced to the nature of the commodity and the consumer is more than simply the process by which the commodity is obtained. Rather, through the contribution of intrapsychic, biographical, family, gender and cultural forces, a person-object relation is regulated which in turn gives rise to identities, understanding and everyday practices.
>
> (Lunt and Livingstone 1992:85)

Second, shopping is normally an everyday activity. It is not therefore constantly reflected upon. Many shopping skills are practical, learnt, literally, at a mother's, or father's, knee through performative explorations involving a mixture of mimesis and being a part of conversations. Such skills are therefore always joint, embodied, and practical-moral in character (Thrift 1996). They are also always attuned to the situation at hand and involve a skilful copying, a readiness to deal 'appropriately' with people and things. Examples of these skills are legion. They range from knowing how to push a defective supermarket trolley through the practical calculative skills Jean Lave (Lave 1986; Lave and Wenger 1991) has so interestingly documented amongst supermarket shoppers to 'having a nose for a

bargain' and being able to deal with an intimidating shop assistant. And these skills, as we note in a subsequent chapter, are highly valued.

But, third, this is not to say that shopping is utterly unreflective. In particular, it intersects with all kinds of discourses which people participate in to a greater or lesser extent. These discourses which are as much passed on by people through conversation as they are passed down from the media involve, most particularly, the constant worrying away at dilemmas which are the result of shared bits and pieces of social knowledge which are in conflict (Billig et al. 1988). Thus:

> the rhetorical approach does not start by considering individual motivations or individual information processing. It starts from the assumption that knowledge is socially shared and that common sense contains conflicting, indeed dissonant, themes. It is not neatly systematised in a way that permits the individual who has dutifully accepted society's values to generate automatically all necessary thoughts, actions and argumentative discourse. Instead, common sense provides the individual with the seeds for contrary themes, which can conflict dramatically in dilemmatic situations. Because these are seeds, not flowers, all is not fully systematised. Contained within the conflicting general principles are many different possibilities, which may on occasion give rise to argument and debate. Rather than applying their systems unthinkingly, people must also deliberate and argue about which seeds need planting at which times in order to develop into flowers. And when people so debate or argue, then living has a dilemmatic quality.
>
> (Billig et al. 1988:20)

The dilemmatic quality of discourses is clear in the shoppers' accounts given in subsequent chapters. For example, 'nature' represents a series of key dilemmas for shoppers. Nature represents a simpler, more attractive reality. But that representation can be brought (or should it be bought) into question by shopping. Price (see also Smith 1996) provides a good example of this disruption in her description of the US retail chain, The Nature Company, which, as an anchor of many malls, is targeted at middle class consumers:

> The store sounds like fun, and it is. So why do I feel ambivalent?… Why does the store 'feel false' to some of its patrons? Well, to begin with, the Nature Company is not nature. And among the set of meanings we've attached to the natural world, perhaps to most overarching and powerful is that nature is *not* a shifting set of human meanings. It's tangible, secure, rock like, stable, self-evident, definable, real. In a word, it's natural. Not that we don't know or acknowledge that nature means definable things to us, like 'solitude' or 'relaxation'. But the meanings themselves seem universal, indelible, indigenous to the rocks and trees themselves. And nature, we tend to assume, is for everyone, or should be. 'Nature' is not constructed, like a

> movie, to tell a story that appeals to a definable audience in a certain time and place.
>
> Ordinarily if you buy your pruning shears at the hardware store, or your bird guide at a bookstore, these convictions don't face any serious threat. In fact, my friend testified that a trip to Ace Hardware for gardening tools would not feel like an 'inauthentic' experience, nor would she feel 'manipulated'. In the garden, too, where you're surrounded by what is undeniably real and tangible about nature, nature feels seemingly natural. But, here, where the Nature Company has brought together thousands of nature-oriented products, the boundaries we've drawn around 'nature' begin to become visible. If you compile the complete pool of meanings, and stack and shelve them all together in one room in a mall, they begin to look like meanings. And in this upscale venue, practically neighbours with Emporio Armani, whose meanings they are becomes an almost palpable question. Few of us will respond with, 'Aha, so the meaning of nature is not so self-evident or universal after all'. The response, I think, is closer to 'um, wow'. The store invites us in, but plants the vague suspicion that nature is a very human, historically shifting idea—not precisely what most of us are shopping for.
>
> The Nature Company is engaged in a highly tricky pursuit. It's marketing a product—middle class meanings of nature—to target consumers who tend to question the product's existence. The company also markets 'authenticity', 'uniqueness' and 'simplicity' in the extravagant maw of South Coast plaza. It's a lucrative business if you can do it, but the very meaning that the 'Nature' in 'the Nature Company' immediately callstomind —the antimodern associations that are the company's real commodity provoke many nature lovers to doubt the most basic features of the enterprise. The Nature Company, tapping flawlessly into the market for anatomically correct inflatable penguins, and the perfect place to go to encounter what nature means to America's 'affluent middle aged' in the late twentieth century breeds some distrust among its clientele.
>
> (Price 1995:190–1)

Fourth, shopping is about social relations. We take it as axiomatic that we live through others, in joint action with them. It is no surprise, then, that shopping is as often about others as it is about self (and even when it is about self, it is often still about others). In our society, the chief of these others is the family, a structure of affinity that few of us escape: as Adam Phillips (1994: 39) puts it: 'if sex is the way out of the family, falling in love is the way back, the one-way ticket that is always a return'. It is no surprise, then, as we show in chapter 5, that shopping is so often about the moral economy of the family. Buying goods is often as much about others in the family as it is about the shopper, especially for women. Of course, family is not only a support but also a constraint, and many of our shoppers feel this dilemma constantly. They cannot live without family affinity

but family affinity also brings tiresome obligations, both on an everyday basis and most especially in the case of significant consumer festivals associated with the family—Christmas, birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day and so on. Saddest of all are the cases of persons who try to repress time by fulfilling obligations that other family members no longer reciprocate: here the buying of goods becomes a kind of emotional cargo cult.

Some commentators have suggested that, besieged by consumer capitalism, the family is on the wane as a network of social obligations and affinities. The evidence, in fact, seems to suggest the opposite. As Pahl (1995:179) puts it: 'as long as we do not make the silly mistake of conflating household with family, it is arguable that the family and family relations are now, in the 1990s, stronger than at any time in the past'.[5] But what is clear is that the family is being paralleled as a network of social obligation and affinity by other social networks based on friendship (Allan 1996; Giddens 1991).

These 'families we choose' (Weston 1991), based on criteria such as sexuality, are a significant element of modern societies. Thus 'choosing certainty' is bolstered, even underpinned, by goods which underline the value of interpersonal relationships (as in the 'Forever Friends' line of greetings cards). In so doing, one might argue, as have Finch (1989) and Strathern (1996), that these families we choose are, in a sense, simply reclaiming traditional familial virtues.

What seems clear is that, if anything, social relations have become more rather than less dense, and maintaining these relations in turn demands constant and considerable consumer expenditure. Thus, on the question of whether people in Britain lead socially isolated lives one commentator provides a very clear answer, that

> most people do not. Most of us have personal networks which contain large numbers of others and within which a smaller number are particularly important to us. Some of these important relationships are with kin and some with non-kin. The patterns here do vary depending on a wide range of circumstances. And equally, some people do lead quite restricted lives and are socially isolated. The point, though, is that this is a relatively unusual rather than the normal state of affairs in contemporary society.
>
> (Allan 1996:129)

Fifth, shopping is about the goods themselves. Consumer objects are not neutral participants in the practices of shopping. They both embody social relations and extend them in new directions. They hail subjects in different ways, as we will see in the use of certain forms of clothing favoured by younger people. They are objects with which people are more or less acquainted, according to their pattern of use and position in a moral universe. And they have their own biographies (Appadurai 1986).

Such a depiction of objects as active participants in consumption does not mean having truck with what Morris (1988) calls 'commodity boudoir talk', in which the

commodity is refigured as responsible for a seductively fallen state —commodities call out to each consumer pulling them into a tainted fantasy world by offering a false intimacy. As Morris, alive to the sexual overtones of this metaphor, makes clear:

> First, one might ask, what is the sound of an intimate and ad hominem address from a raincoat at *BigW?* Where is the secretive isolation of the thongs [sandals] in a pile at *Super K?* The commodities in a discount house boast no halo, no aura. On the contrary, they promote a lived aesthetic of the serial, the mechanic, the mass-reproduced; as one pair of thongs wears out, it is replaced by an identical pair, the same sweat shirt is bought in four different colours, or two different and two the same; a macramé planter defies all middle class wholeearth naturalness connotations in its dyes of lurid chemical mustard and killer neon pink. Secondly commodity boudoir talk gathers up into the style and class-specific image of the elite courtesan a number of different relations women and men may invent both to actual commodities, the activity of combining them and, above all, to the changing discursive frames (like shopping centres) that invest the practice of buying, trafficking with and using commodities with their variable local meanings.
>
> (Morris 1988:221)

Rather, it suggests that objects are social relations made durable. Even simple objects can produce particular relations. For example, Latour (1992) provides the example of an automatic door-closer (in part, introduced to obviate the need for human labour like a porter) which requires swift reflexes and movement on the part of human users, a bodily stance which makes life difficult for small children, the disabled and the elderly. More generally, we can point to the increasing density and complexity of consumer objects, our more 'charitable' (Collins 1990) stance to them and an increasing likelihood of imagining ourselves through these objects.

If there is a consensus concerning the place of consumer objects it is therefore that they are not a part of a separate 'material' realm. Rather, to use the terminology of actor-network theory, they co-produce reality. As Miller puts it in discussing technology:

> What is clear…is that it is not some prior moral culture into which technology is placed, but that technology and life-style are the form through which the ideal of morality is itself constructed. If it is ever abstracted as morality this is done on the basis of the lived relationships, where people discover what their morality is: it is the interaction with the technology which makes the morality as much as the other way round.
>
> (Miller 1992:225)

Sixth, and finally, shopping is about place and identity. One of the key themes of this book is that particular parameters of identity such as the family, class,

ethnicity, and gender are reconstituted by shopping sites through the addition of particular distinctions which emerge from the experience of these spaces. This principle is sufficiently important that we address it in more detail below.

Theorising place and identity

'Identity' has become one of the keywords of the 1990s, denoting both the social recognition of difference and culturally constructed notions of the Other. In particular, the notion has been associated with the rise of various forms of 'identity politics' as older, rigidly defined, class-based identities have given way to a variety of other sources of identity and their associated social movements.

The shifting nature of personal identities in late modernity has been debated at length (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; S.Hall 1992a; Lash and Friedman 1992). For Giddens and Beck, in particular, contemporary identities can be theorised as a reflexive project, shaped by the institutions of late modernity and sustained through narratives of self-identity that are continually monitored and constantly revised. Such an approach is, in part, consistent with our own. But it has to be seen as applying chiefly to what might be called the vanguard of social development where there may be more focus upon the individual. Our empirical work, in contrast, finds that identities are still largely relational. In particular, and in line with the authoritative work of writers such as Finch (1986; Finch and Mason 1990) and Allan (1996), we find that the family still remains as the core context for self-development.

Where our appeal is more in accord with current debates is in its emphasis on identity as a social process that shifts according to social context. Thus, throughout the project, we have explored the way that identities can be expressed in relation to particular places and particular material goods. In other words, we approach identity as a *discursively constituted* social relation, articulated through narratives of the self and accessed empirically through focus group research and ethnographic methods.[6] Or as Somers puts it:

> Narrative identities are constituted by a person's temporally and spatially variable place in culturally constructed stories composed of (breakable) rules, (variable) practices, binding (and unbinding) institutions, and the multiple plots of family, nation, or economic life. Most importantly, however, narratives are not incorporated into the self in any direct way; rather, they are mediated through the enormous spectrum of social and political institutions and practices that constitute our social world.[7]
>
> (Somers 1994:635)

Rather than seeing identity as fixed and singular, it has become common to think of identities as plural and dynamic. For, as Frank Mort argues in his study of the consumption styles of fashionable young men in London:

> We are not in any simple sense 'black' or 'gay' or 'upwardly mobile'. Rather we carry a bewildering range of different, and at times conflicting, identities around with us in our heads at the same time. There is a continual smudging of personas and lifestyles, depending where we are (at work, on the high street) and the spaces we are moving between.
>
> (Mort 1989:169)

Furthermore, although individuals as identities represent specific trajectories, these are related to normative and socialised categories which are objectified by their sites of objectification. So, in Mort's case, what it means to be gay becomes centred upon what the area of Soho in London has come to represent. Similarly, in our work, the shopping centres themselves become a form through which the meaning of class is understood and taken up in individual identity formation.

Thus, as the passage from Mort suggests, theories of identity are increasingly articulated in relation to particular spaces and places, both in the metaphorical sense of boundaries, domains and diasporas (Rutherford 1990; Carter et al. 1993) and also in relation to specific spaces and places (Keith and Pile 1993; Pile and Thrift 1995). In one sense, this is ironic since traditional attachments to place may no longer offer clear support to our shifting identities: 'The presumed certainties of cultural identity, firmly located in particular places which housed stable cohesive communities of shared tradition and perspective, though never a reality for some, [have been] increasingly disrupted for all' (Carter et al. 1993: vii).

Hence the need for new theories of space and place which are more consistent with the increasingly hybrid character of contemporary identities, blending different sources and traditions from different locales. One such is Doreen Massey's (1994) argument for a 'progressive' or global sense of place. For Massey, rather than searching for a lost 'authenticity' based on nostalgia and false memories, places should be understood as a distinctive articulation of social relations from the global to the local. According to Massey, places are not bounded areas but porous networks of social relations, constructed through the specificity of their interaction with other places. Massey gives the example of Kilburn High Road, a pretty ordinary street in north-west London which is linked through a web of culturally inflected social, political and economic relations to places as far apart as Ireland and the Indian sub-continent. Kilburn may have a character of its own, Massey argues, 'but it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, as single sense of place which everyone shares' (1994:153). Thus, Massey provides a means of reconciling the emphasis upon individuals as reflexive creators of identity and spaces as normative objectifications of identity through a sense of identity as a practice in which the ambiguities and pluralism of space allow for related but varied forms of appropriation by individuals, households and larger social fractions.

These notions, which we employ in our study of Brent Cross and Wood Green, clearly parallel contemporary theories of identity such as those associated with the

works of Paul Gilroy, bell hooks and Homi Bhabha. Summarising this literature, Edward Said argues:

> No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are now more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly exclusively, White, or black, or Western, or Oriental.
>
> (Said 1993:407–8)

Traces of such global influences are present throughout the following chapters in relation to the increasingly global sourcing of commodities, for example, and in terms of how people feel about their attachments to the neighbourhood and the nation.

The array of identities with which the modern consumer is currently faced may give rise to a sense of risk and uncertainty (Beck 1992; Warde 1994). But these risks can be 'managed' by ordering them into coherent 'lifestyles', subject to various forms of social regulation. As Judith Butler (1990:135) argues in relation to the permeable boundaries of gender, our identities may be a performative creation but they are made culturally intelligible through regulatory grids such as those associated with an idealised and compulsory heterosexuality. In this sense, identities can be thought of as a 'regulatory fiction'.

And yet most consumption studies, based firmly in the quantitative tradition of marked research, continue to adhere to a simple typology where identities are classified according to a binary, either/or, system. In a recent *RetailIntelligence* report, for example, the consumer research organisation MINTEL (1994) classified shoppers into five mutually exclusive categories, which break down by gender in a highly stereotypical pattern (see Table 1.1).

According to such typologies, men are simply more 'reluctant' or 'obstinate' shoppers than women. There is no understanding of the circumstances in which such stereotyped views might not apply or how particular individuals may be 'purposeful' in relation to some kinds of purchases while being 'addicted' to other kinds of shopping.

While such categorisations have understandably lost favour within contemporary social theory because of their implication that identity is singular and static, similar schemes are still widely used in social science research on consumption. In reviewing the literature on the 'modern consumer', for example, O'Brien and Harris (1991:120–1) provide a litany of such classifications: status seekers, swingers, conservatives, rational men, inner directed men and hedonists; pragmatists, bargain-hunters, satisfied shoppers and shopping trippers; purposive, time-pressured, fun and experimental shopping. Even some of the most sophisticated of recent studies, such as Lunt and Livingstone's *MassConsumption*

Table 1.1 Market research classification of shoppers

	Male	*Female*
Per cent classified as:		
addicted	8	22
happy	13	24
purposeful	36	34
reluctant	24	13
obstinate	18	8

Source: MINTEL, Retail Intelligence report 1994, figure 52.

and Personal Identity (1992), utilise a simplistic schema, classifying their respondents into five mutually exclusive categories: alternative, routine, leisure, careful and thrifty shoppers.

Such categorical approaches may be a necessary prelude to statistical analysis but they bear little relation to the shifting and complex nature of social identities where we rarely think of ourselves as one thing at all times and in all places. Judith Williamson provides a striking anecdote with which to combat such simplistic ideas, admirably expressing the complex relationship between consumption and identity:

> When I rummage through my wardrobe in the morning I am not merely faced with a choice of what to wear. I am faced with a choice of images: the difference between a smart suit and pair of overalls, a leather skirt and a cotton dress, is not just one of fabric and style, but one of identity. You know perfectly well that you will be seen differently for the whole day, depending on what you put on; you will appear as a particular kind of woman with one particular identity *which excludes others*. The black leather skirt rather rules out girlish innocence, oily overalls tend to exclude sophistication, ditto smart suit and radical feminism. Often I have wished I could put them all on together, or appear simultaneously in every possible outfit, just to say, How dare you think any one of these is *me*. But also, See, I can be all of them.
>
> (Williamson 1986:91)

Theorising consumption as a social process rather than as a single, isolated moment of exchange leads to new ways of theorising identity. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), for example, Mary Douglas (1996) suggests that modern identities are constituted through our relationship with the symbolic world of consumption rather than through a direct relationship with the material world. Focusing specifically on 'protest shopping', she finds much of the current literature on 'consumer choice' in market research and social psychology insulting to the intelligence of the consumer. The rationality of the consumer, according to Douglas, emerges from seeing consumption as a choice not just between different

kinds of goods but between *kinds of relationship*. Douglas applies this argument to an analysis of 'mindless consumerism', where goods are allegedly desired for their own sake, for purposes of self-indulgence or personal display. By showing that the ownership and display of such goods is part of a consistent social pattern, she argues, we can demonstrate how people's tastes and preferences are clearly politicised. The basic choice, according to Douglas, 'is not between kinds of goods, but between kinds of society, and, for the interim, between the kinds of position in society that are available to use as we line up in the debate about transforming society' (1996:112).

Our own argument is not dissimilar, though rather less grand in its ambition. It is applied at a more domestic scale, in terms of the investment in *socialrelationships* that takes place during the apparently mundane work of shopping. Instead of reducing identity to a series of 'cultural preferences and lifestyles' —in Hobsbawm's (1996) rather dismissive phrase—we have approached identities as multiple and contested, discursively constituted through narratives of the self, constructed in relation to socially significant others and articulated through relations with particular people, places and material goods. It follows that rather than simply inferring people's identities from the purchases they make, our main interest is in how they narrate their identities, drawing on a relatively limited repertoire of available images and representations. Thus, we do not seek to describe the purchasing habits of different social (family, class, ethnic or gender) groups. Rather, we are interested in the way that narrative identities are constructed by these different groups and in the different discourses on which people draw as they relate to particular types of goods in particular kinds of places.

Shopping malls

So how are identity and place bound together in the practices of shopping? There is, first of all, the obvious point that shopping takes place at a wide variety of different sites, each of which represents often quite different kinds of shopping experience and resources for identification: high streets, supermarkets, shopping malls, airports,[8] petrol/service stations, motorway service stations, factory outlet villages, retail warehouses, garden centres, shops in stately homes, museums and art galleries, charity shops, second-hand shops…the list goes on. Second, even sites which may appear superficially similar may prove to have quite different practices of use and valuation which, in turn, appeal to certain forms of identification rather than others.

Shopping malls, on which we concentrate in this book, is a case in point. Yet malls are not always seen in this way. There are currently at least three competing interpretations. In the first of these malls are often elevated to the status of bridgeheads of an all-conquering capitalism. They are homogeneous consumer machines, creating consumer homogeneity. Baudrillard's work is perhaps the most obvious early example of this apocalyptic tendency. For him, in the mall, the

consumer is caught up 'in a calculus of objects, which is quite different from the frenzy of purchasing and possessions which arises from the simple profusion of commodities' (Baudrillard 1988:31). This is because the basic concept of the mall is 'ambience' rather than the encoding of factors which are meant to have specific psychological effects on a shopper's choices. As Lunt and Livingstone put it in their explication of Baudrillard's views:

> the shopping mall affords the opportunity of participation in the currency of modern society: exchange (implying a contrast with the structure of Athenian democracy where the currency of participation was argument). The shopping mall is a public forum—the site of participation in late capitalist society as formulated through commoditization. The consumer culture is a new form of the manipulation of the ordinary person by the exchange system. When the family goes to the shopping mall together at the weekend, the mall provides a form of leisure, of structuring time, and a site for constructing family relations of gender and generation. Our identities and experiences are produced by the experience of participation in the cultural form of late capitalism—the shopping mall.
>
> (Lunt and Livingstone 1992:21)

For Baudrillard, then, a consumer apocalypse is nigh:

> We have reached the point where 'consumption' has grasped the whole of life, where all activities are squeezed in the same combinatorial mode; where the schedule of gratification is outlined in advance, one hour at a time; and where the 'environment' is complete, completely climatised, finished and culturised…work, leisure, nature, and culture all previously dispersed, separate, and more or less irreducible entities that produced anxiety and complexity in our real life, and in our 'anarchic and archaic' cities, have finally become mixed, massaged, climate-controlled, and domesticated into the single activity of perpetual shopping.
>
> (Baudrillard 1988:33–4)

This kind of apocalyptic talk still periodically reoccurs in the literature. For example, Bauman seems convinced that the coming of malls marks a kind of postmodern *Independence Day*.

> 'Malls' in its original meaning refers to the tracts for strolling. Now most of the malls are *shopping* malls, tracts to stroll while you shop and to shop in while you stroll. The merchandisers sniffed out the attraction and seductive power of strollers' habits and set about moulding them into life. Parisian arcades have been promoted retrospectively to the bridge heads of times to come: the postmodern islands in the modern sea. Shopping malls make the world (or the carefully walled-off, electronically monitored and closely

> guarded part of it) safe for life-as-strolling. Or, rather, shopping malls are the worlds made by the bespoke designers to the measure of the stroller. The sites of mis-meetings, of encounters guaranteed to be episodic, of the present prised off from the past and the future, of surfaces glossing over surfaces. In these worlds, every stroller may image himself [sic] to be a director, though all strollers are the objects of direction. That direction is, as their own used to be, unobstructive and invisible (though, unlike theirs, seldom inconsequential), so that baits feel like desires, pressures like intentions, seduction like decision-making; in the shopping malls, in life as shopping-to-stroll and strolling-to-shop, dependence dissolves in freedom, and freedom seeks dependence.
>
> (Bauman 1996:27)

This kind of negative account is carried through in a milder but ultimately no less condemnatory form in much other work on shopping malls (for a review, see Jackson and Thrift 1995). For example, Goss (1993) uses a language of 'plots', 'lures' and 'decoys' to describe what he sees, using de Certeau's (1984) terminology as the 'strategic' space of the malls, a space that seems to have previous little room for de Certeau's 'tactics'; where 'radical soon becomes radical chic' (Goss 1993:41). The mall is an instrumental landscape, designed by the 'captains of consciousness' to bend consumers to its will. The tale, in other words, is of a glitzy facade behind which lurks a grimmer, exclusionary reality: 'the alienation of commodity consumption is concealed by the mask of carnival, the patina of nostalgia, and the ironic essences of elsewhere' (Goss 1993:40).

In the second account, the mall becomes the opposite of the apocalyptic account: now it is a polysemic playground of redemptive meanings. The works of Paul Willis (1990) and John Fiske (1989) are usually taken as the major instances of this kind of tendency. In Fiske's *Reading the Popular,* for example, he optimistically interprets a bumper sticker—'A woman's place is in the mall' —as a form of ironic resistance to women's subordination to domesticity in the home. The shopping mall is a place 'where women can be public, empowered and free, and can occupy roles other than those derived by the nuclear family' (Fiske 1989: 18–20). Shopping itself is interpreted as a practice with subversive qualities; it values women's consuming skills and knowledge; the woman's spending of her husband's money [sic] is an act of conjugal resistance; shopping even has carnivalesque aspects.

Such an account has considerable problems. As Slater puts it:

> the undeniable fact that people are not 'cultural dopes' is taken to warrant investigating their active 'symbolic labour' as if it were unconstrained by social relations and necessarily subversive of them. Consumption always seems to happen in the 'gaps or spaces'—a realm of free self-determination —rather than in the guilty practices of mundanity; and these gaps or spaces always seem to be spaces of rebellion. The result is a continuous production

> of redemptive readings in which texts and objects are always viewed in terms of the spaces they offer for pleasures and fantasies through which people can 'make sense', and the consumer's redemptive readings will always neutralise whatever is 'bad' in the text.
>
> (Slater 1997:169)

Our account is rather different from these two extremes. Taking its cue from the work of writers such as Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu and Daniel Miller, it interprets shopping malls as a part of the process by which goods communicate, and are communicated as, *social relationships*. In turn, we see malls as places which perennially reconstitute these relationships through various practices of shopping and identity. In particular we follow Meaghan Morris's (1988) seminal article, 'Things to do with shopping centres', which decisively short-circuited the kind of thinking which frames consumption as either a seductively fallen state or a semiotic democracy. It did so in five main ways, to which we also subscribe.

First, her article refused to subscribe to the idea that all shopping malls were, at root, identical. For Morris, shopping malls have histories; she is aware that, 'if the shopping mall appears new and placeless today, this is because it has not yet been integrated back into its surrounding urban fabric, either by wear and tear, or by feats of the imagination, or by reputation' (Savage and Warde 1993:143). Thus, whereas some of Morris's malls are new and gleaming, others are growing old and dowdy.[9] Like Brent Cross, their concrete is stained and they look 'seventies'. It follows that it is no surprise to find that, for Morris, each mall has a distinctive 'sense of place' and 'it isn't necessarily or always the objects consumed that count in the act of consumption but rather that unique sense of place' (Morris 1988:194). As she says:

> Obviously, shopping centres produce a sense of place for economic 'come-*hither*' reasons, and sometimes because the architects and planners involved may be committed, these days, to an aesthetics or even a politics of the local. But we cannot derive commentary on their function, people's responses to them, or their own cultural production of 'place' in and around them, from this economic rationale. Besides, shopping-centre identities aren't fixed, constant or permanent. Shopping centres do get facilities, and change their image—increasingly so as the great classic structures in any region begin to age, fade, and date.
>
> (Morris 1988:195)

Further, as Morris points out, this sense of place is increasingly played to. As more and more shopping malls appear so they are having to differentiate themselves from the others: a display of difference may well be an increasingly important part of the marketing strategy of shopping malls.

Second, performances by people in shopping malls constantly exceed the wishes or plans of their designers and managers.

> The stirring tension between the massive stability of the structure, and the continually shifting, ceaseless spectacle within and around the 'centre', is one of the things that people who like shopping centres really love about shopping centres. At the same time, shopping centre management methods (and contacts) are very much directed towards organising and unifying—at the level of administrative control, if not of achieved aesthetic effect—as much of this spectacle as possible by regulating tenant mix, signing and identifying styles, common space decor, festivals, and so on. This does not mean, however, that they succeed in 'managing' either the total spectacle (which includes what people do with what they provide) or the responses it provokes (and may include).
>
> (Morris 1988:195–6)

They also often exceed the works of academics and other researchers since

> you can't treat a public at a cultural event as directly expressive of social groups and classes, or their supposed sensibility. Publics aren't stable homogenous entities—and polemical claims assuming that they are tell us little beyond the display of political position and identification being made by the speaker.
>
> (Morris 1988:204)

Third, shopping malls cannot be seen as the habitat of the 'cruising grammarian', a flâneur-*like* shopper taking everything in and critically evaluating it with a sceptical eye. They can and do inspire complex and localised affective relations which can never conform to this stereotype. Sometimes, indeed, malls may be little more than 'managerial props for the performance of inventive scenarios' (Morris 1988:223). More to the point perhaps, from Morris's feminist perspective such a stereotype entirely misses the fact that shopping is often hard and tedious graft: 'the slow, evaluative, appreciatively critical relation is not enjoyed to the same extent by women who hate the car park, grab the goods and head on out as fast as possible' (Morris 1988:203).

Fourth, shopping malls have to be considered in relation to other sites of shopping. One of the ways they obtain their qualities is by contrast to the other sites at which shopping takes place: to an extent, the attraction of the malls relies on the existence of other, less salubrious sites. In turn, the perceived middle-classness of many malls has produced the development of new retail forms like the neo-arcade and the revamped city centre department store aimed at up-market shoppers.[10]

Then, fifth and finally, Morris promotes a catholic methodological strategy based on the principle of ambivalence towards the material that confronts her and her own position. She recognises the value of what she calls 'professionally-based informatics'—procedures for sampling shoppers, searching for exemplary figures, targeting user groups, and so on. But her own method is much closer to that of

ethnography, and mainly consists of 'chit-chat' 'with women' I meet in and around and because of these centres that I know personally' (Morris 1988:208).

These five principles inform the work that we carry out in this book on shopping in Britain. Thus, first of all, our concern is with shopping malls as very different kinds of places, serving very different kinds of publics, a fact of which management is very aware, and makes constant allowance for. In Britain, the variation in the identity of shopping malls that comes from age and location is increasingly played to; as the number and size of shopping malls has increased, and with it competition, so the earlier malls are both forced to keep up with *and* differentiate themselves from the newer malls, through rebuilding and refurbishment, aesthetic strategies like new forms of signage and marketing campaigns. For example, Brent Cross, which we consider in detail in this book, has been facing severe competition as newer and larger malls open near it. Thus whereas in 1992 Brent Cross was in second place in DTZ Debenham Thorpe's annual index of retail trading; it was sixth in 1994 and ninth in 1996. The mall has responded by building an extension, by letting in more 'natural' light, and through marketing campaigns (see chapter 3). But, ironically perhaps, much of this response simply mimics current industry wisdom from the United States and so does much less to differentiate the mall than might be supposed:

> The recent spate of upscale-mall renovations rely liberally on the addition of skylights, greenery and fountains. In fact, I'll argue that such face-lifts have been undertaken precisely to attract the baby boomers—now the chief commanders of disposable income—who object to the generic placeless aura of the malls they grew up in. Build a fountain, they will come; developers install nature like a sign to affluent middle-class shoppers, saying this place is a real place, and it's for you.
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> (Price 1995:188)

Second, we take it as axiomatic that the ambience of shopping malls cannot be reduced to just the play of dominant social categories. Even in Britain, there is, to use one of Benedict Anderson's (1983) neologisms, no obvious 'unisonality' about shopping malls. The increasing diversity of British civil society has ensured that even shopping malls which may seem predominantly middle class, such as one of those we consider, are criss-crossed by all kinds of other divides which mean that they do not add up to one public. Third, we are sure that British shoppers, like Morris's Australian shoppers, cannot be framed as 'cruising grammarians'. As our evidence shows, for many of our shoppers for much of the time, shopping is as much an obligation and a chore as a pleasure, an activity which is periodically enjoyed but from which enjoyment is not expected as such. If critically evaluative skills are brought into play, it is relatively rarely for the purpose of play. Fourth, in Britain shopping malls are one of a number of different kinds of shopping that is undertaken. Whereas in the United States or Australia, malls are an integral part of the landscape, in Britain, where the density of malls is

much less, they are still often only used periodically, in conjunction with many other forms of shopping. Fifth, and finally, our methodological strategy has been, like Morris's, a catholic one which mixes numerous methods, such as standard survey techniques, focus groups, and ethnography in an attempt to 'triangulate' the practices of shopping. Before outlining our methods, however, we provide a brief discussion of the history and development of the two centres.