

The Anthropology of Shopping

In the wake of 9-11 President Bush made his novel and much satirized call for us to shop our way back to normalcy. For some, this conflation of patriotism and consumerism struck a sour note. But perhaps he was reaching for something more--an inchoate evocation of the restorative power of shopping, its therapeutic influence on our troubled hearts. As an anthropologist these symbolic and emotive qualities to shopping are what interest me.

Shopping is a central creative activity of American life, a kind of populist performance art. In shopping we connect with different facets of our selves, explore new ones, and enact any number of cultural ideals, myths really, about our social world. If you want a crash course in American attitudes about childhood, family life, masculinity, motherhood, class, and nation to name a few possibilities, go shopping.

Good shopping, and successful retailers, provide the cues, symbols, and well crafted spaces that engage our cultural imagination. We can be an elegant consumer of couture (Neiman Marcus), a together family (Target), one of the boys (Best Buy), a capable homeowner (Home Depot), a playful courtesan (Victoria's Secret), an edgy iconoclastic egghead (The Mac Store), at least for a brief and breezy moment.

We move in and out of retail's many living myths every day, assessing them, validating them, in a word, "living" them, and in the process making them ours. These are myths with a small "m"; not the Joseph Campbell variety, but myths all the same. That is, stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, about who we are, about who we could be, even if the artifice is very short lived.

Shopping is so ordinary, so much a part of our day to day lives that we are apt to lose sight of its cultural salience. Occasionally shopping does get some critical attention. But most often its of the Grinch who stole Christmas variety.

Shopping is an easy target for all sorts of opprobrium. Shopping as affliction--it is "addictive" and stymies our ability to save. Shopping as malaise--it is symptomatic of restless, hedonistic materialism. Shopping as populist expression of unfettered consumerism--it is geo-politically destabilizing, ecologically unsound and just plain piggish. All of these critiques have a familiar and gloomy ring to them, as though American civilization will soon crumble under the weight of its overstuffed closets.

Putting aside the relative merits of these positions, macroeconomic and otherwise (will the pie disappear or just get bigger?) there are underlying moral dimensions to our views about shopping. Like all interesting political-economic questions, it's a matter of values.

Living the Dream

The idea of America as a material utopia has been the subject of opposing states of mind since our country's beginnings. As early as de Tocqueville, observers have pointed to the material underpinnings of the pursuit of happiness, that quintessentially American, and otherwise quite abstract and illusive ideal. Clichés be damned, what more perfect expression of happiness nabbed than a 1950s tableau of a suburban family on the backyard patio, Dad in short sleeves grilling hamburgers and hot dogs, pool shining blue diamonds in the late afternoon sun and the smell of fresh cut grass? So what if films like *The Graduate* and stories like *Rabbit Run* showed us there were snakes in the garden (as if this were news anyhow).

The proposition that shopping could be a means for us to participate in some ideal and at the same time be commercial to the core is a thoroughly American paradox. Yet, for many, shopping and consuming do provide a rough and ready experience of individual freedom, that typically American expression, freedom of choice, and subversive as it may sound, a genuine subjective sense of our selves.

Indeed it is hard to picture our peculiarly American brand of expressive individualism without consumer culture. California dreaming is at its heart a consumer's dream, a dream lived (and consumed) in woodies and surf boards and Billabong shorts and sunsets over the ocean. Being a consumable utopia it was bound to suffer the ignominy of clogged freeways stacked with SUVs, In and Out Burgers, and Bay Watch. Being exportable and brandable, it has retained some measure of its mythic vitality, in Hollywood, Ronald Regan, Corvette convertibles, once again Bay Watch. This is what so many non-western societies, along with those testy French, find subversive and threatening, the fact that we so effectively transport our ideology in our stuff.

The notion that shopping can provide some glimmer of magic that takes us briefly out of our choppy quotidian lives is hardly a revelation to millions of Americans. The retail temples of Rodeo Drive, Fifth Avenue, are purposely designed to create that moment of transformation as one passes from street side into the singularly focused topography of brand, and life style. Subtract the museum-like displays a la Bergdorf's or Neiman's and the same intention can be gleaned from the Apollonian harmony of the Banana Republic, (a world where everything matches) or the roll up our sleeves ambiance at Home Depot.

Shopping as Transformation

Of course all kinds and manner of shopping do not have this conversionary power. This is not something we are likely to experience on an ordinary milk run, though clearly, not all convenience stores are created equal. So the question needs to be posed; What transforms shopping from being a simple practical endeavor into a culturally meaningful and emotionally charged experience? What kinds of shopping have the capacity to transform, to take us out of our busy, often turbulent everyday lives and in to a space and time that is more or less explicitly somewhere else?

The answers here are provisional but clearly certain retailers have found ways to create emotional and cultural connections with shoppers. Design, the in-store environment, a powerful brand idea, perhaps even advertising contribute to making these connections. But it seems the key is the larger whole. Good shopping is a gestalt. In fact, it takes two to tango; a retailer that is able to frame a coherent space-time, a brand idea, a distinctive shopping experience, *and* a willingness on the part of shoppers to participate in this experience. What makes our contemporary culture so remarkable is how keen we all are to participate in these choreographed experiences and join the dance.

Here again we are faced with that peculiarly American paradox; the interpenetration of the mythic with the commercial and the commercial with the mythic. Mythic experience takes us out of ordinary everyday existence with all its noise, cross currents, compromise, and contradictions into a symbolically coherent space and time. It brings us into sharper contact with certain facets of ourselves, cultural motifs, and ways of being in the world by providing a heightened and singular expression of these. The fact that we can live such mythic moments when shopping, often barely aware it at the time, is perhaps the meta-myth of them all, the American myth.

Living Myths

I confess to experiencing an almost sublime sense of plenitude while grocery shopping in the new generation of super markets that are now commonplace across America, (Central Market in Austin comes to mind). Living happily in Brooklyn, I am wedded to the eclectic urban experience of shopping at my favorite neighborhood butcher, green grocer, wine shop, bakery and taking forays for the best tortellini around at Russo's on 7th Ave or superb olives at Sahadi's on Atlantic. I guess its this kind of shopping that really puts me in touch with my Brooklyn side, a myth of its own, hatched over 20 years in residence. At no time do I feel more like a Brooklynite-- neighborhood guy, connoisseur of the local, with all those complex social ties of bonhomie, loyalty, obligation, and insider-ness, than when I'm getting stuff for dinner at 4 or 5 shops around the corner from my house.

So my infrequent visits to a *real* supermarket, not to be confused with the cramped and discouraging Key Food in my neighborhood, are always high impact. The context can't be ignored. I'll be on vacation, visiting with friends or family out of town, so a certain exuberance and expansiveness is to be expected. But there is no mistaking the wonderful fullness that I experience when entering these stores. Just the hugeness of these places communicates a sense of promise and possibility. Then, there are the layers upon layers of information, colors, shapes, signs, smells, traffic, that when artfully designed, is thoroughly and pleasantly digestible.

I like to steer the cart, and begin at a slow measured exploratory pace. The produce aisle, its more like a boulevard, with islands of yams and bananas, and sweet Vidalia onions down the middle, has a long line of green and leafy vegetables, glistening from a barely perceptible mist being generated by some hidden source. For my money this sets the

spell. By the time I turn at the end of the aisle, my cart already absurdly overloaded with produce, and look down the back lane at the meats, fish, prepared foods, and deli that is also the conduit for dozens of other aisles and sections, I have fully entered the myth American of abundance.

The impression of limitless choice, and plenty is both dizzying and comforting. In the homey graphic signage, the goods in stacks like harvest time, even the energetic and amiable professionalism of staff, there are echoes of our agricultural past. Visitors from an earlier time might hanker for a large glass of cold butter milk and hot apple pie. I take a truly regressive pleasure in the frozen food section, where Morton's fish sticks, Swanson's chicken pot pies, and the titillation of TV dinners take me back to my 1960's childhood, to my own foundational experiences of the myth of American abundance. Another myth within a myth.

My enthusiastic participation in the theater of grocery shopping might seem ridiculously overblown to the typical suburban householder, but the cues are all there, and when done right, the stage craft, (lighting, blocking, choreography) is compelling. Once again it is the lived, performative side to shopping that creates the magic. A big part of that magic is the way that good shopping invites us to slip between everyday reality, the theatrical and the mythic, and back again, often with barely any notice.

Lets take a few examples from a recent field study of retail shopping, part of my workaday life as consulting cultural anthropologist. For this assignment I was partnering with a senior ad ex who was on the hunt for a new account and wanted to bring something fresh to the table. We recruited "native guides" to show us what makes good shopping in various retail settings. They were a small group, demographically diverse, selected from the data base of a NY based marketing research company. We visited their homes and then went shopping at their favorite stores in predetermined retail categories. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of our respondents, whom I hope in true anthropological fashion will show us a bit of the exotic in the familiar.

myth 1 Fashion as Time Travel

For Lily, our guide to Neiman Marcus, shopping is a time to gather information and intelligence about a world that's quite different from her everyday. Lily is a kindergarten teacher who lives and works in suburban Connecticut. She has a quiet gracious way that could almost be mistaken for demure. And she has the kind of subtle mind that quickly grasps the spirit of our interview. I try to imagine her with a bunch of bouncy and exuberant 6 and 7 year olds, perhaps giving them an early lesson about rigors and rewards of writing thank you notes.

Lily sees shopping at Neiman's as a kind of time travel and discovery. In her words, she wants to see "what's on the edge" of fashion: "There is a desire to know...I have to know what's out there."

What's "out there" is a world of elegance, style, and chic. For Lily it is a mythic place that is portrayed in certain catalogs, in advertisements, and in the Style section of the New York Times. Lily is very familiar with this world. She is continually gathering information, clipping pictures, and sharing observations with her mom, a frequent shopping companion: Is that cut and shape something that is back from the 60s? Where have they seen that color?

Neiman's is a place where Lily gets in touch with this world, quite literally. She moves past the feather and sequined slippers, the "museum cases" holding exclusive bags and into the heart of the store where she can touch and handle "objects", size up color, texture and shape. There is an explicit dream like quality about these shopping trips. She is looking, touching "dreaming about parties", participating in the myth of elegance.

Lily lives in a 19th century house, which she and her husband have lovingly restored. She clearly takes pleasure in putting things together, finding just the right color for her bathroom tile, a shower head to go with the cabinet handles she found in Florida. Her style, as she explains, is not "matchy matchy." She pulls things together from various sources. A process, she acknowledges, that can take months.

Good shopping for Lily is about discovery. It involves finding an object that fits with an idea or image in her head, (or a picture that she's folded under her bed room pillow). It provides those "a-ha" moments that validate her sense of taste and style. It often involves linking past to present. Seeing a retro line in a new garment, or recognizing the classic design of a porcelain faucet handle.

Underlying these moments is a heightened sense that she is in the know, that she is part of something bigger. Shopping becomes a form of play, moving from fantasy to the concrete and back. It is also a kind of confirmation, connecting one's personal sensibility to a wider cultural framing of style, class, taste. "It's the excitement of recognizing that object would look great on me...my adrenaline is going. It's sort of like the person who discovered the Titanic...its not that I have to *have* that object, its that I *found* it!"

Neiman Marcus does a remarkable job of creating an environment that encourages discovery: The museum like displays of the most exclusive merchandise; The scarves laid out "so that an inch of each one shows...so that without even touching I can tell what each is like; The capes "all hanging with three inches of space between each one"; The hats "all arranged on J hooks." She calls the store a laboratory.

The other Neiman denizens add some magic as well. Well heeled customers, the glamorous staff, the piano player near the entrance all contribute to the creation of a coherent space-time that provides "the best of the best...things that are of a world...things that take you somewhere." Even the Westchester location that she visits takes her closer to that world.

Lily, middle class kindergarten teacher from Danbury, feels like she can participate in this world. There is an attitude, "a generosity about the place" she explains, that makes

her feel special and important. At Neiman's Lily can live the myth of elegance. She participates in a sense of style, a way of being in the world that is both timeless and up to date. Discovering a part of that ethos, a part of herself in that ethos, is validating and exhilarating. In Lily's words, "you have a feeling that you should be shopping here because you belong here."

Neiman's certainly must recognize what a potent emotional connection Lily and others like her get from shopping in their stores. And, one suspects, the commercial implications. While their purchase power may be limited, their participation in the Neiman myth gives that myth broader currency. Without this knowing audience what Neiman, along with the designers and brands featured there, have to say about elegance and style would have far less cultural import.

myth 2 Boys will be Boys

Keith grew up in Tennessee, the only child for the first 20 years of his life. He retains some of that pampering in his demeanor, combined with the social grace that so often comes with a southern upbringing. He is a big African American guy, well over 6 feet, well over 200 lbs, with a casual but evolved sense of style. He meets us on a very hot Saturday wearing a designer sleeveless athletic shirt, long frayed shorts, and very snazzy sandals. Keith would be our guide for Best Buy.

Keith works as a sales exec for a tele-com company. He analyzes the communications costs of small and medium sized companies and shows them how he can do better. He wears suits to work, and breaks out a little with his choices of shoes and ties. His style reflects his outlook; "Have fun and stay focused."

He enjoys shopping for shoes on 8th Street in Greenwich village, enjoys window shopping, popping in and out of stores between client visits, seeing what's new. After a good month of commissions he and a friend can go on a shopping crawl from midtown south, stopping for lunch, maybe end with a movie, and "really do some damage." Shopping is a way for Keith to celebrate his successes, and stay fresh and connected to a casual hip style.

Keith lives in a spacious floor through apartment in Jersey City. The place has a warm open feeling, decorated with earth tones, Afro-centric art and family photos. There is a large TV, and bank of components, DVD and VCR players, stereo, amp, tuner, etc , large and smaller wall mounted speakers in the living room. This is one installation of his "stuff." Near by he has a standing rack for holding CDs and the DVD collection he is building. He has a similar set up (full home entertainment center) with a Sony flat screen in his bedroom.

Keith likes gadgets. He likes to get on the floor with manuals and put things together. And he likes sitting at home with the sound cranked up, enveloped by his music, or an action movie. The world of consumer electronics has this curious two sidedness about it.

It plays to the home body side of him (his living room is framed by two big comfortable coaches) and it is something about which he is intensely curious.

This inward/outward orientation may be something distinctive about the category. *Home* based entertainment, music, movies and games combine an outward oriented search to enhance, heighten, and add extra layers to what are often intensely personal, fantasy centered experiences. This double sidedness is something characteristic of boys play where the mastery of “toys” (in this case tech toys) provides the culturally sanctioned “cover” for boys to enter into a world of pure fantasy and play.

Keith seems to balance these sides quite well. He gets off the couch quite regularly to see what new gadgets are out there. He does “a lot of research” through newspapers, magazines and by talking to friends. But stores are his key source of information. Stores serve as a kind of laboratory (think of Lily) where Keith keeps tabs on what’s new and learns from staff about new features and capabilities. When he is actually shopping for something, (he is looking at digital video cameras now) his approach is to keep coming back, learning a little more as he goes, talking to staff, and trying things out. He bought his home entertainment system this way, piece by piece. “I don’t go and impulse buy”, he tells us. All his stuff has extended warranties.

Keith is pretty clear about what he is looking for in an electronics store. First, it needs to have plenty of merchandise, different brands and “different layers” (read categories) of merchandise, e.g. music, cameras, DVDs, TV, speakers. This rules out most of the discount electronics merchandisers endemic in the city where “the goods” are featured and there is no space or thought given to the totalizing experience these goods can deliver.

The Best Buy we visit in Jersey City fulfills all these “rational” criteria for success. But listening to Keith so does his other favorite, Circuit City. What he especially likes about Best Buy is the immediacy, the interactivity of the place: “As soon as you walk in you are right in there with the merchandise...it is right in front of your face.” The environment encourages exploration, discovery and play. It’s a place where boys will (and can) be boys .

Stepping out of a busy parking lot on the edge of Jersey City you enter a huge high ceiling space, cool and gray, illuminated by overlapping pools of direct white light. Overhead, perhaps 12 feet up, is a ribbon sign that winds serpentine fashion around the store listing all the categories of merchandise on display, e.g. Web TV, Wireless and PDA, Digital Cameras, Games, etc. Aisle and island signage provide navigational aids to the various locations in this tech world, a parallel universe of gadgets, toys, games, sounds and images.

It seems like everything works and everything is on, or could be on with a punch of the button or click of the mouse. The TVs, the radios, computers, and PDAs, an island full of video cameras, all are operating. Everything is inviting us to play.

A young boy, he can't be more than 3 feet tall, is completely engrossed in an Xbox game that is framed by an aisle cap display. At the other end of the store, a young Hispanic mom is working the remote of a large color TV with her kids huddled around. There are easy chairs set out by the speakers to capture dynamics of a sound system. And somehow, the acoustics of the store work so that sounds from other locations don't totally impinge on the sounds of the radio, or TV, or speakers you are listening to.

Overall, the store creates a space and time for boyhood, in its most universal, nearly non-gendered expression. The staff is overwhelmingly young, male, enthusiastic. Gamers and techies of one sort or another, but quite approachable. Meanwhile, shoppers are moving in and out of these moments of play--eerily private, fantasy based play, and more public exploration and browsing that is easily recognizable, in a conventional sense, as shopping.

The extent to which shoppers participate in Best Buys basic brand idea "Your Electronic Playground" is remarkable. The brand has such emotional saliency because of its deeper cultural roots in a boys will be boys mythology. Best Buy has provided the environment for its customers to explore and play with its merchandise. But it also makes deeper cultural sense to engage in this *kind* of play in a place where all of us can be boys.

myth 3 Family Togetherness

Camilla grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1970s and early 80s, born into a conservative and enveloping Puerto Rican neighborhood. She describes her early family life as "protected." She has three young kids, and could almost be taken for their older sister, though a few moments in her home quickly dispels that impression. Her husband is a banker with local political aspirations. She works remotely for a large insurance company, grabbing time on the computer when she can get it around the staccato requirements of her children's lives. Despite the full court press that is her daily life she retains a native optimism, energy and freshness about her. Now it is simply her turn to do the sheltering. Camilla took us on a tour of Target.

Camilla's family moved to Nutley NJ three years ago, and bought a modest older home on a quiet block. They are very lucky, Camilla thinks, to have landed in such a community. Nutley is a family town and it seems to have an inexhaustible supply of activities and events for the kids. This year her son is trying football, next season it might be hockey.

On a recent trip to Puerto Rico Camilla took her dad and niece to the Gap. It was a memorable day. She had not seen her father in 4 years and it gave her a chance to show him how she had grown up, and share her sense of style. The Gap is a favorite of hers. It seems to provide the comforts of being firmly in the middle, fresh faces, well scrubbed. "It's mostly women who shop there", she explains, "16 to 40...business women." She bought a dress for her niece. Her dad decided to go to Sears for a pair of Lees.

Target shares some thing of this in-the-middle quality with the Gap, though it is a much livelier, buoyant and ambitious brand. For instance, Camilla will buy her “plain and simple” facial products at Target, things that she is going through all the time, e.g. eye liner and lip gloss. Likewise, Target fits the bill for her kids who “go through clothes like crazy.” Occasionally she will even get a few things for herself, a pair of shorts, a tank top. “Even though you have clothes from last year, you want new things.”

Replacing and refreshing the ordinary stuff of daily life-- her work out clothes, her kids shorts, her husbands tee shirts, is a big part of what Target means to Camilla. The fact that Target does this with style adds another dimension. In a world where kids sneakers can easily cost \$75, and last 2 months, Target is offering a very attractive alternative--- shoes, that “look like Sketchers” or other “cool” brands *and* are affordable. “My Kids *like* Target shoes, they like the ones with the cartoon characters and the ones with the lights flashing on them.”

Camilla likes the ways that Target uses design to connect with shoppers, it is something she “just enjoys”. She has recently bought a lamp, an end table, and storage bins for her kids toys. Her most exciting finds, are the Hello Kitty sheets, pillowcases and comforter that pull together her daughter’s bedroom. She admits that she went through a Hello Kitty phase too.

Part of the pleasure of Target are the continual surprises, the unlikely juxtaposition of different sections and the sense of freshness and possibility this engenders, like bumping into Hello Kitty around the corner from kitchen wares. It encourages the larger notion and experience that you are shopping for ideas. As Camilla observes “it’s in the way they decorate things”. So you are not simply replacing the everyday things in your life. You could do that at Kmart. You are infusing everyday life with sense of surprise, energy, style.

Target provides countless symbols and cues to communicate this idea. Large hanging poster-like signs saying things like Chunky, Stretch, Plaid proclaim the stylistic notion behind the shoes or boots or tops that are on the floor. Boots and Barkey provides “tips for selecting pet bowls”...is it tongue and cheek? A seasonal Todd Oldham “Dorm Room” display makes the vigorous suggestion that things should not match.

Perhaps the most potent messages come through the design values expressed in simple home goods, a pair of scissors, a magazine rack, a garbage pail, that suggest possibilities for a stylish home, and a stylish life. This is certainly the case for Camilla. For her son it might be the possibilities inherent in an aisle with five rows of wildly different colors and designs of soccer balls. For her daughter, perhaps the suggestion of “Xhilation” on a giant poster of socks that look just her size.

This something for everyone diversity persistently refers back to home and family. To an outside observer watching the ways that families shopped the store, the effect seemed quite extraordinary. No one seemed in a rush. I saw no acrimony, no crying kids or scolding moms. Big red carts transport little and medium sized kids nestled in the

merchandise with their older brothers and sisters tagging close behind in shopping expeditions that resemble little wagon trains.

The visual drama, the sense of freshness and renewal, the promise of something to suit everyone's needs and desires just around the bend seems to have a charming effect. And it plays on the deeper cultural truth for families today, that togetherness comes by providing the space for a diversity of tastes and interests. Target provides an environment where people can live this myth of family togetherness through diversity. It clearly is not the only myth that Target shoppers may live but it does seem like a particular powerful way for families like Camilla's to participate in the brand.

Myths with a small m

By any yardstick shopping is a key feature of American life. Economists calculate that shopping accounts for roughly two thirds of our nation's economic activity. But what kind of *sense* we make of the dynamic relationships between consumer spending, job creation, capital flows, savings and interest rates is notoriously partisan, the well trodden ground of competing economic paradigms and political ideologies.

Culturally, its another story. The very everyday-ness and familiarity of shopping provides terrific cover for its mythic content and likewise the possibilities of seeing a bit beneath the surface. And that's the way it should be...the myths we tell ourselves about ourselves should not be transparent to the natives, at least most of the time.

We like to assign a gendered knowledge to this esoteric side of shopping. The skinny, upper, 40ish woman who is fluent in the language of handbags and shoes provides a ready caricature. This feminine knowledge is easy to devalue, easy to misread and so often, easy to vulgarize, particularly for those of us who don't have "the shopping gene."

Despite these prejudices, which I must admit I have shared, a little cultural distance (the anthropologist's favored perspective) reveals that these ladies who shop might be on to something rather fundamental. Furthermore, shopping can engage all and any of us in the creative and continuous process of myth making. It gives us a chance to live or at least try on different facets of our social and situational selves and to participate, however inadvertently, in myths about how to be a boy, about the privileged and magical status of childhood, about the quasi-human status of our pets, about elegance, abundance, raunchy desire, or the moneyed opulence of superior plumbing.

Undeniably, these myths with a small m are bent for commercial purposes. But we shoppers do most of the bending ourselves. The notion that popular culture is expropriated by small band of retailers, branding wizards, and corporate managers is a ridiculous conceit. A good tagline may capture a mythic reality, but it is not going to create one. Successful retailers take their cues from the cultural zeitgeist. It is not the other way around. Funny, but I don't think de Tocqueville would be surprised.