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Shopping at the Strand

I'd go shopping at the Strand, celebrated "used book store" on 12th and Broadway in NYC, with my advisor a couple times a month. These forays continued throughout the "early" and "middle" eras of my graduate school career. Finishing my PhD in Anthropology was something of a calling...I often felt a kind of medieval tempo prevailed. In those early years, taking those first timid and truly naïve steps into a scholarly guild, shopping at the Strand became a pivotal part of my education.

This was an education in the archaic sense...out of the classroom, and out on the streets with my mentor T. Straining to keep pace as he weaved nimbly through dense sidewalks, (I was new to the city, and still had quaint ideas about pedestrian etiquette and yielding to oncoming cars and buses). Vainly trying to engage in some kind of conversation while trailing in the wake of his agita, or was it single-minded effort to reach this ever enticing destination. At any rate, these were rarely ever "walks" of the sort that one might picture, student and teacher absorbed in some East Village version of Socratic exchange.

The comedy of our trips, though rarely available to me at the time, helps keep them vivid in my memory. But so does the place itself. These trips revealed an antipodean world of esoteric subjects, thick bibliographies, and sunless stacks where a florescent hum provided a slightly dissonant resonance with the mental humming one encountered from typical Strand customers. These shoppers, along with the swollen ranks of Strand employees, bespectacled, lank haired, properly boney or pudgy and pale, as one would expect, formed a unique social milieu.

The world we collectively inhabited as shoppers was one of densely threaded pathways, some unexplored and some familiar territories, (i.e. sections labeled African history, Dadaism, Erotica), and numerous islands (long, waist high tables actually) whose various attractions or even organizing principles often provided for brief distraction or study. Navigating in and around the material we encountered...the books, their organization, propinquities, and their mana, (and of course one another) created a tacit sympathy between us, a kind of temporary citizenship.

The Strand was our country of "alterity", even the name bespoke a kind of geographic specificity, a place where shoppers could briefly slip out of NYC's "go go" early 1980s...red power ties, junk bonds and mergers, massive homelessness, punk rock, graffiti art, downtown emerging, Keith Haring and Julian Schnable, blow tooting, nouvelle cuisine, Nuyorican Poet's Café, SoHo News, Ronald Regan and Cap Weinberger, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, bath house nights, Korean shiatsu break of day mornings, David Winfield and Don Mattingly, Yankees slumping era.

What made it so, what we were slipping *in* to, is a very fascinating question. Partly it has to do with relationships between place and time. Retail environments that become “worlds” do so by tapping into a *gemeinschaft*, a truth, a cultural moment. And most crucially, they are able to show us something very concrete about it. This “reveal” is a function of design and shoppers interactions (symbolically, socially, physically) with and within such designed spaces. Brilliant design doesn’t simply build a world (like Santa’s workshop at Macy’s) but gives us the play to articulate our relationship to that world. Semiotics plays an important function in this interpretive activity, but like all forms of communication, the meta-messages, engendered by our history, past experiences, and cultural context, are what become lived and felt. In this rudimentary fashion, the semiotics of retail design are animated by shopping. It is what both of “us” (retailer and shopper) bring to the party.

In the case of the Strand, circa 1980, shoppers were, almost literally, served up a world on a plate. It was a world of old school merchandising--“18 miles of books”, as their motto proclaimed, (and more sight seeing opportunities than you’d be likely to find on a similarly lengthy walk around Monaco), on wobbly wooden floors, displayed in unvarnished book shelves and bins, all jammed together in a riotous spilling over at the seams organization, with its musty, some would add musky, smells, its distinctive native race (Strand employees in the black and red tee shirts), and those sublimely heterogeneous shoppers, Goths, SoHo gallery types, university professors, transvestites, Midwestern, Japanese, European tourists, very well heeled prospectors, diffident graduate students and haunted looking indigents, bibliophiles and bibliomaniacs of every stripe,—it WAS a country of its own.

The Strand’s utter distinctiveness, its unapologetically eccentric, rich and ambiguous personality—remember this was before Barnes and Noble’s retailing idea was thoroughly consolidated and widely promulgated—was perhaps more in sync with the times than it has been before or since. This was the moment when postmodernism was quite noticeably sticking its nose under the tent. It was getting pretty hard to ignore the multiplicity of “worlds”, identities, or “subjectivities” that a postmodern ethos illuminated and legitimized...in fact the share holders in these worlds were getting increasingly adroit at staking out such territories. And as a citizen of these times, especially one that was university based, the ability to slip in and out of these worlds seemed to be an important, if not an imperative, social skill. Tectonic shifts of power, and authority were rumbling under foot---something William Bennett would rail about half a decade later. Looking back, I think my trips to the Strand helped me to articulate my relationship to that truth.

Also remember that by early 1980s, the notional experience of authenticity was just starting to be widely valued and commoditized in popular culture. One could still walk into one-off bookstores, or movie houses, or coffee shops, or baseball stadiums without immediately thinking ‘wow! look how authentic this place is’. Sure, WalMart, Starbucks, Barnes and Noble, Home Depot, or Camden Yards induced nostalgia for “real”, or at least more diversified, specimens of retail, had begun to take root. But you

could still come to a place like the Strand, or the Film Forum, or some old-timey hardware store, or Fenway Park without feeling a tangible sense of loss, or its more prurient stepchild, irony.

To my newcomer's eyes, the Strand experience, and aesthetic, was very much unreconstructed...no embellishment required, no self-conscious effort to manage the brand, which parenthetically, is a big part of the Strand's business strategy today. The Strand's personality was rooted in its commercial success—clever merchants, doing clever merchandizing. The brand evolved organically. This was something that shoppers could recognize immediately, through what amounted to a kind of physical induction into Strand World.

It wasn't as though the pervasive anxieties of the times were somehow screened as one entered the store. But you did check your bags, were given an oversized plastic numbered doodad, like the door keys for a low rent motel, and entered Indian file through a single lane turnstile. This quaintly mechanical countermeasure to shoplifting had the accidental effect of being the threshold to Strand World. It reminded me of entering the movie theatre as a kid and triggered that same mental state of suspended disbelief. Here was a place where a receptive shopper such as myself could encounter a compass of possibilities that cumulatively *described* "anthropology" or any number of other subjects for that matter. Not a simulation of the "real thing" (e.g. "anthropology") but an opportunity to take measure of the real thing. Like moviegoers, Strand shoppers could enter a space/time where such a perspective was possible.... far more so than the G.14 section of my university library (where anthropology books and journals reside).

Of course here is where my mentor T. did his real mentoring. He showed me that anthropology was fundamentally a syncretizing discipline that, potentially, took in just about everything under the Strand's roof. He rarely spent much time at all with the anthropology books, in fact, was much more likely to steer towards history, or art or even the mystery section. T. the indefatigable, always after a new find. He showed me how to navigate (or how an anthropologist whom I respected might) and cut me loose.

The environment itself taught me lessons, chief among which are the value and importance of having a richly singular and idiosyncratic perspective, the importance and pleasures of observation (of people and places and how they come together) and the importance of cultivating a fundamentally subjective way of understanding other "worlds" we encounter (what Max Weber called *verstehen*). These are hardly the unique and sole provenance of anthropology, but for me, the anthropology grad student, such insights seemed to crystallize in the Strand. Poking around those 18 miles of books, I came to see that a one-off bookstore could become another country-- something other than a touristic adventureland...more like a place of second citizenship.