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978-0-521-62630-9 - Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption

Kim Humphrey

Excerpt

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## Introduction

From where I stood, towards the front of the supermarket, I was able to see straight down one of the aisles. I watched them, a young girl and her mother, walk up this aisle, and I followed them at a distance as the girl made her choices. This English supermarket, like many others I have visited in Europe and Australia, offered its younger customers miniature shopping trolleys. These trolleys are a little over two feet high and are the domain of the probationary consumer.

Several choices had already been made by the girl, and her mini-trolley was filling up quickly. The woman with her did not have a trolley of her own and was simply grabbing a few necessities – and a few luxuries as well – while allowing the girl to let her desires wander, obviously curtailing them if her chosen items wandered too far past the budget or the choice she made seemed ‘naff’, a term I heard the woman apply to one tacky-looking item.

And as I came closer, I lost my status as the observer. I was with this party and these people were my friends, not objects of my detached analysis whose words I need to place in inverted commas. Their words were my words too, as were their everyday pleasures and frustrations. We were doing something we always did when I came to visit them – indulge in a touch of consumer recreation, consumer therapy. For us this was not the weekly essential shopping trip – although there were many frazzled-looking people around us fulfilling that task – but the ‘visit’. This was a cheap thrill enforced by limited income and encouraged by the lure of the abundant, the exotic, and the sheer carnival of supermarket shopping: mangoes, rambutan and starfruit from the other side of the world, cheeses from the continent and ‘in-house’ delicacies, efficient and stressed women with feral children, fumbling male

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shoppers and crushingly bored checkout people, and, of course, the recreationists like ourselves.

Now, on a very different continent in the city of Darwin, I am watching again in a similar setting. Outside, there is a monsoonal trough that will never dampen Britain and crocodiles that feed a tourist trade along with the mythology of frontier. Here, there are mangoes on the trees as well as on the supermarket shelves. But inside those supermarkets, differences in environment and culture are seemingly minimised. I have not managed to find a mini-trolley as yet, but the frazzled people are here in Darwin's supermarkets, as are the efficient women and fumbling men, the feral children, the exotic fruits (which strangely retain an exotic air even though they are local), the necessities and delicacies, the endless checkout queues, and at least one recreationist-cum-observer.

Between them, Sainsbury's, Tesco and ASDA – the three largest commercial supermarket chains in Britain, where this study began – sell their products to well over 20 million customers a week and account for around 36 per cent of the retail sales of grocery items in the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In Australia, where this study took shape, the three largest corporate supermarket chains, Woolworths, Coles Myer and Franklins, between them control almost 76 per cent of the national retail market in packaged groceries.<sup>2</sup> These basic statistics confirm that the supermarket is a major economic and social institution of highly industrialised nations.

Not so long ago these retail institutions represented new worlds. Now, for most people in the industrialised world, they are familiar places. This study takes the reader inside the supermarket, historically and culturally, in order to follow this transition from the new to the familiar. In doing so it offers an exploration of the supermarket as a retail form and as an arena for everyday consumption. It attempts to situate historically and critically explore the everyday food products we buy, the retail environments in which we buy these products, the attitudes of the retailers who constructed such environments, and the diverse ways in which all of us undertake and think about supermarket shopping.

Although this study outlines briefly the rise of the supermarket in the United States and Britain, it focuses in particular on the emergence of the large corporately owned supermarket in Australia. By looking in detail at the development of the Australian supermarket, we are able to grasp some of the complexities involved in supermarket shopping, reflect on the global nature of retail forms, and trace some of the connections between the supermarket and other aspects of late twentieth-century everyday life. We are also, very importantly, able to explore contemporary social and cultural criticism in relation to what has been called 'consumer culture', to question whether such critique has, to date, been particularly useful in grasping what it means to consume and to be a consumer.

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## Retail Cultures, Consumer Cultures

According to most retailing histories, the supermarket emerged as a particular retail form in the United States of America during the 1930s. The worldwide spread of this retail form, however, has not simply been a process of transference; it has also been one of permutation. The supermarket emerged within countries outside the United States at different times and, in doing so, took on local as well as global characteristics. There is undoubtedly a similarity to supermarkets around the world, as the above observations make plain, but underneath that similarity, differences are still there.<sup>3</sup>

The supermarket did not fully arrive in Australia until the beginning of the 1960s. While the concept of 'self-service' had long been a facet of grocery and other forms of retailing before this time – and a number of supermarkets were already in operation by the early 1950s – it was only during the early 1960s that large retail companies such as Coles and Woolworths developed chains of purpose-built, free-standing 'one-stop-shops'.

When the big corporate supermarket finally emerged in Australia, it was heralded by retailers as 'tomorrow's shop today', as the symbol *par excellence* of Australia's transition to a high modernity. Drawing heavily on American retailing know-how, Australian retailers nevertheless attempted to localise the new shopping environments and to make the supermarket Australia's own.

Commercially, they were highly successful. From the late 1950s onwards, the supermarket quickly became the dominant form of food distribution in Australia, which now has one of the most highly concentrated retail food markets in the Western world, controlled as it is by only a handful of companies.<sup>4</sup> But the emergence of the supermarket in Australia is not examined here as a story of commercial success or corporate monopoly. It is, more importantly, discussed in terms of its social and cultural significance. Culturally, and economically, the emergence of the supermarket was part of the transformation of post-war Australia into a 'modern consumer society'. Like the large suburban shopping centres that were developed also in the 1960s, the supermarket transformed the culture of retailing, and with it, the way people shop. The transformation also had social importance in that the supermarket encouraged a change in people's relationship to food and other everyday goods; not only how they bought them, but what they ate and used, and the skills they needed or didn't need in order to utilise supermarket products.

These changes have been even more remarkable because of the speed with which they have transformed our relationship to the everyday products we buy, to what is available, to how it is sold, and to how it is produced, packaged and marketed. Indeed, few Australians below 30 or 40 years of age have first-hand knowledge of shopping prior to the emergence of the one-stop-shop.

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Launching modernity: opening day at the Coles-Dickins New World supermarket, Dandenong, Victoria, November 1963 (Coles Myer Archives)

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While these changes were to affect all Australians, it was women who were and remain the principal users of the supermarket – and the main source of labour in the retail and food manufacturing industries. As Gail Reekie has pointed out, historians of the retail trades and of consumer society have, until recently, failed to sufficiently explore the fact that women have always been the vast majority of shoppers within retail spaces.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, retailers, at least at management level, have generally been male and, while readily acknowledging women as their ‘market’, they have done so in ways that have constructed highly gendered images of the ‘lady’ shopper, the housewife and ‘Mrs Consumer’. These gendered aspects of supermarket retailing and everyday shopping are explored throughout the following study.

Although women, along with the children who often accompany them, still remain the principal supermarket shoppers, the ‘profile’ of those who use the supermarket has changed, particularly over the last decade, to include more solitary male shoppers, and men accompanying women.<sup>6</sup> As the supermarket has become the dominant form of food distribution in Australia, the distinctions between shoppers on the basis of class, age, race and ethnicity have become blurred, giving rise to an apparently ‘undifferentiated market’ in food retailing. The contemporary Australian supermarket, it seems, is open to almost all, regardless of social demarcations, and many of the goods on sale are affordable to a wide range of people.

This is not to suggest that all supermarkets are the same or are egalitarian spaces deserving of celebration. There are significant differences between particular supermarket chains and individual stores, depending on the ownership, size, stock and location of the store, and the perceived social make-up, and therefore tastes and budgets, of its customers. Moreover, there are very definite class, gender, race and ethnic demarcations between those who work within the supermarketing and food manufacturing industries.

While the supermarket industry has always liked to project an image of itself as the champion of choice and egalitarianism, retailers are well aware of the different buying behaviours, tastes, preferences and financial capabilities of particular groups of people. There is no such thing as homogeneous mass markets. Markets are always subject to demarcation, fragmentation and complexity, however great the number of people who visit a particular retail environment or buy a particular product.

As this study insists, retailers develop *retail forms* and construct *retail cultures*; they do not create smoothly functioning mass consumer cultures, however hard they may try. *Consumer cultures* arise only in the interaction between those who have something to sell and those who look, listen, watch, wander, feel and sometimes buy. These cultures, too, always reflect social difference. In other words, retail environments have no power to make consumer cultures until those environments are peopled, and until those socially and

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culturally differentiated people begin to identify as possible consumers. Thus consumer cultures, unlike retail spaces, are not planned, they are negotiated.

Of course, for most people in the West, consumption is an important part of our lives. In the apparent choice, independence and power it offers, it is – as we shall see throughout this study – bound up with values of freedom and self-determination. Consumption spaces and cultures can be seductive; they can and do frame the very ways in which we experience the world. But this is not the whole story. The cultures of consumption are fragile and need constant reinforcement. Even when we do enter an environment like the supermarket, we think about and respond to this particular type of retail space in diverse ways. At times the supermarket may be viewed in purely utilitarian terms – a place to buy food. At other times it may present itself as a cheap thrill – a place for a touch of consumer recreation. On the other hand, wandering the supermarket may become a heavy chore. In our wanderings we may become frustrated and even enraged with the crowds, the impersonal service, the oppressive lighting and falsity of choice between products, the prices, the packaging, the hard-sell marketing techniques, and shopping trolleys that seem to move in every direction but the one in which we want to head.

Supermarkets are not simple places. On the contrary, in all their everyday mundanity they embody some of the enormous complexities of living and consuming in a society such as late twentieth-century Australia. It is the task of this study to explore some of this complexity and to draw out some of the connections between the rise of the supermarket and broader social and cultural transformations in post-war Australia. The aim of this study is to give the ‘one-stop-shop’ a past and a cultural context. Its aim is to leave the reader with a slightly altered sense of what it means to wander the supermarket, gaze at its products and take home its goods.

### **Theoretical Positions**

As we explore the supermarket, historically and culturally, we begin also to trace the rise of consumer society within industrialised countries and to examine some of the intellectual debates surrounding this development.

Up to this point we have been using the terms ‘consumer society’ and ‘consumer culture’, the definitions of which have been assumed.<sup>7</sup> For many social theorists and cultural critics, the term ‘consumer society’ has, until recently, carried a rather negative connotation. It has come to refer largely to the (destructive) impact of ‘mass consumption’ on daily life within industrial and post-industrial societies. As the realm of consumption has expanded to involve increasing numbers of people (i.e. ‘the masses’), it has seemingly led to the organisation of many social activities around the practices of consuming. It has led also to the involvement of people in buying an increasing



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range of goods and services. At the same time the apparent 'consumerisation' of social life has been accompanied, critics have argued, by the rise of consumer cultures. That is, consumption has not only become an apparently ubiquitous part of our daily life, but has become entangled with and productive of meanings, of the way we view and represent the social world, think about ourselves and communicate with others. These social and cultural aspects of consumption are inseparable.

There is, however, ongoing debate in relation to historicising this process. While some writers have traced the beginnings of a consumer society to the early modern period in the West, most have focused on the emergence of mass-produced goods in the nineteenth century as signalling the beginnings of a fully developed consumer society. More specifically, some writers have suggested that it is only in the post-World War II period that Western societies have become fully characterised by the proliferation of consumer goods and experiences.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the time-frame offered, the emergence of consumption as a key economic and social activity has given rise to an extensive body of theoretical work. Consumption has been one of the central categories through which theorists and cultural commentators have attempted to interpret modernity and postmodernity, and to critique and explore the nature of everyday life under conditions of industrial and post-industrial capitalism. The 1980s, in particular, witnessed a renewed interest in consumption as a social phenomenon, especially within my own disciplinary areas of history and cultural studies, and it is within this intellectual context that the supermarket presented itself as a potential subject of serious study.<sup>9</sup>

As I entered the supermarkets that were to become part of this book, I did so not only as a shopper but also as a cultural analyst, an ugly term though it is. This latter role became increasingly the reason for my constant wanderings up and down the aisles of my local supermarket and many others I visited in Europe and Australia. Yet as I wandered I struck a problem. The more I experienced the supermarket, the more I began to feel a stranger among contemporary analyses of consumption practices and the more frustrated I became with the apparent one-dimensionality of recent debates on consumer culture.

My remaining task is to explain this estrangement and foreshadow some of the ways in which the following study attempts to step outside this one-dimensionality.

By the early to mid-1980s the consumption of goods and services in contemporary Western societies had been embraced by many writers within cultural studies and other disciplinary areas as a potential arena of personal empowerment, cultural subversion, and even political resistance.<sup>10</sup> Within this analytical framework the 'consumer' was positioned as active, rather

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than passive, as the 'producer' of *usages* and *meanings* that the marketplace may not have assigned to a particular commodity or consumer space, and which potentially undermined or evaded consumerist ideologies. The mass market of consumer goods, services and experiences, then, was no longer viewed as promoting a mindless, empty materialism. Instead, cultural analysts turned to a recognition of human agency, emphasising the manner in which people 'make do' in transformative and oppositional ways with what is offered to them under conditions of consumer capitalism.<sup>11</sup> In short, the person who consumes was no longer thought of, within cultural studies at least, as being simply manipulated – by wearing make-up, or enjoying shopping, or watching and listening – but also as manipulating back, by often ignoring and sometimes subverting dominant meanings, implied messages and hidden persuaders.<sup>12</sup>

This analytical turn to the active, subversive, resistant consumer – and I am generalising here about a broad body of work – was explicitly formulated in opposition to a perceived critical orthodoxy.<sup>13</sup> This orthodoxy was one involving a rejection, or at least a suspicion, of mass consumer culture, a position shared by many twentieth-century theorists and critics – conservative, liberal, feminist, Marxist, anarchist and postmodernist alike. As a number of writers have argued, many, though certainly not all, twentieth-century social theorists have tended to interpret consumption as embodying the materialism, social fragmentation and destructive individualism seemingly embedded within the rise of Western modernity and, more recently, postmodernity. As a global consumer culture, geared to rampant mass production and endless self-gratification, has become an apparently ubiquitous part of modern and postmodern life, it has been taken as emblematic of all that is negative and bland within twentieth-century Western society.<sup>14</sup>

This study does not explore theories of modernity and postmodernity in detail, a relief perhaps to those readers not keen on 'high theory'. It does, however, draw on these concepts in the process of historicising the supermarket. It also examines the apparent gulf between the cynics and the celebrants of consumer practices, questioning the extent to which there exists a sharp dichotomy between supposedly innovative and orthodox theoretical and critical frameworks. That very 'gulf' is embedded to some extent within the difference between social theory and other forms of contemporary cultural analysis.

Broadly speaking, social theorists have been concerned primarily with social structure and cultural framework. In grappling with the tension between structure and agency, they have tended to emphasise the workings of large, impersonal forces which shape history, social formations and self-identity, and which *act on* individuals, moulding them in the image of dominant ideological frameworks. Alongside this, cultural studies has



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emerged as an alternative intellectual field, one which certainly engages with social theory and is influenced by it, but which explores the actual practices of daily life under conditions of modernity and postmodernity.<sup>15</sup> In relation to consumption, writers within cultural studies have attempted to shift the ground of cultural analysis, building on theoretical traditions which emphasise the importance of the popular and of a sympathetic exploration of the manner in which everyday actions and thought evade 'containment'.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, within such a framework a language of resistance remains important. Consumer culture is not accepted or celebrated in its entirety within the recent cultural studies of consumption; rather a structural analysis is suspended in favour of a discussion of specific consumption practices. This approach can be easily grasped by reference to any one of a number of 'sites' or areas of Western consumer culture. The use of the shopping mall, for example, has been explored in these terms. While the shopping mall has been, and continues to be, interpreted as a falsely carnivalesque, bland and alienating space of conspicuous consumption, recent cultural analysis has sought to explore the popular use of these consumer environments as recreational spaces and as arenas within which notions of community and forms of self-identity are expressed.<sup>17</sup>

Such an approach potentially deepens the interpretation of consumer cultures. Once cultural commentators move towards a local, semiotic analysis of products and their purchasers, and away from a predominantly structural analysis of the social, economic and cultural systems in which consumption is embedded, easy assumptions about what the consumer is doing, thinking and feeling become a lot more difficult. As one recent discussion of cultural studies insisted, a social institution such as the shopping mall:

offers no quintessential insight into the organisation of an epoch or a culture (it is not an emblem or an essence of the postmodern condition or of consumer capitalism); it is a place where many different things happen, and where many different kinds of social relations are played out.<sup>18</sup>

The supermarket also illustrates this complexity. In one sense the corporate supermarket – with its abundance of packaged products, its crowds of nameless shoppers, its overbright lighting and its interminable muzak – seems a culturally barren environment, an empty, unreal space where the person/consumer becomes confused, seduced, compliant, anything but resistant. In another sense, however, this doesn't seem to be what is going on at all. It is not very useful to assume that people are merely compliant consumers when wandering through a retail space such as the supermarket, or that these environments and the use people make of them are culturally bereft. This rests on a further assumption that the meaning of shopping and

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consumer wandering is 'fixed', or functional to and entrapped by the retail environments and marketing discourses in which consumption takes place. As this study attempts to show, the supermarket's carnivalesque and often unreal qualities do not necessarily mask the retailers' motives or capture the shoppers' imagination – let alone their spending power.

**Participation and Refusal**

The Australian writer Meaghan Morris has argued, some time ago now, that one of the problems to have emerged in connection with the burgeoning of social theory and cultural studies as academic disciplines is that 'new' frameworks of analysis become very quickly dated and rapidly overused.<sup>19</sup> This 'quick-as-a-flash' adoption of the new tends to make certain frameworks of interpretation appear tired and even obsolete before very much has been said, but not before a whole swag of books have hit the shelves.

The point still stands, and the past decade and a half of interest in the cultural analysis of consumer practices is a good example. By the early to mid-1990s, the focus on the active consumer and on the complex reality of watching, listening and shopping had begun to look like last year's model. The more that was being published on the subject, the less, it seemed, was being said. With each new title on consumer culture I got the unmistakable feeling that I was buying the same text, a text in which the concept of consumption as an active and potentially subversive project had become as much of an assumed truth as earlier theorists' assumptions about a life-world wholly dominated by the shop and the ideologies that went with it.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most positive aspects of the recent attention given to consumer practices is that it has entailed an acceptance of the market as an essential element of everyday life in late twentieth-century Western societies. Moreover, it has promoted the consumer marketplace as a site to be dealt with, not dismissed – as a site of human agency, personal fulfilment and potentially of politics. Yet by the mid-1990s explorations of the active consumer had reached a political dead-end, unwilling or unable to move far beyond simply 'mapping' the various ways in which we as individual consumers are supposedly able to resist and subvert.<sup>21</sup> This perhaps explains why, in the late 1990s, academic interest in the subversive consumer has now all but vanished, although, as I shall argue below, a resistance/containment dichotomy continues to frame discussion.

I am certainly not the first to express frustration with the attention given to consumer practices within recent cultural studies (and I would hope that my own obvious frustration will be seen as critique rather than dismissiveness). Some writers, including many working within the field of cultural studies itself, have long been critical of the manner in which the resistant consumer has been theorised, preferring instead to remain slightly more