The Global Shop

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Abstract:
Global retail spaces, from the Body Shop and Benetton, to Gap and Ikea, are a common feature now of urban streetscapes and shopping precincts throughout the economically developed and developing world. These environments of consumption and social relations have an everyday prominence in many people’s lives, and they are moreover the subject of sometimes intense public debate and political opposition. This paper explores the presence of and public response to global retail spaces – particularly Borders and Starbucks - in Australia, emphasising aspects of opposition rather than offering a culturalist reading of ‘use’. It suggests that a level of public concern at the emergence of the global retail space emanates from a nationalistic/localist sense of the global shop being ‘not of us’; from a commercial sense of international retailing being monopolistic; and from an activist sense of global retail space as colonising and exploitative. However, the paper explores also the related sense of ontological insecurity and an affect of unease evoked by such global retail concerns, exploring their perceived failure (in part through a conflation of global space and local place) to ‘hold’ us.

Introduction
Global retail spaces, from the Body Shop and Benetton, to Gap and Ikea, are a common feature now of urban streetscapes and shopping precincts throughout the economically developed and developing world. These environments of consumption and social relations have an everyday prominence in many people’s lives, and they are moreover the subject of sometimes intense public debate and political opposition. It is this second element of opposition with which I will be most concerned today. Indeed, my principal interest here is in exploring the presence of and public response to what I will call the ‘global
In face of this arrival, and in no uncertain terms, academic writers and social commentators have generally sounded alarm at the emergence of, to use Benjamin Barber’s term, a ‘McWorld’ in which culture becomes homogenised and consumption replaces citizenship. (Barber 1995). I’ll come back to this critique a little later when I shift to a more theoretical discussion of place. What I want to do right now, however, is very briefly explore how the rise of global retailing has been greeted in Australia and has become embedded in what we might call a ‘discourse of public unease’. This unease emanates, at least in the Australian context, from a nationalistic/localist sense of the global shop being ‘not of us’; from a commercial sense of international retailing being monopolistic; and from an activist sense of global retail space as colonising and exploitative. Such unease is connected also, I want to suggest towards the end of the paper, with the ontological insecurity and negative affect evoked by global shops, with their failure (in part through a conflation of global space and local place) to ‘hold’ us. By ontological insecurity, a term that has been variously utilised by a diverse array of theorists, I refer simply (and perhaps not so simply) to the manner in which the abstraction of social relations involved in such retail space disturbs a sense of embedded self-identity and emplaced existence.
As we all know, many, but not all, of the big names in global retailing are here in the major Australian cities, covering all parts of the body and the soul: McDonald’s and KFC, The Body Shop and Nike, Ikea and Aldi, Tommy Hilfiger and FCUK, Borders, Starbucks, Gloria Jean’s and Delifrance, Toys ‘R’ Us, Virgin and Krispy Kreme. – to name but a few. It seems thus indisputable that the transformed retail streetscape of Australian cities is part of a broader process of contemporary globalization.

Yet, we might also recognise that Australian consumption has long been globalized. Commodities in Australia have come since the colonial era, either literally or culturally, from elsewhere while the shops we frequent have been modelled on European and American retail space. In its modern guise, the global shop in Australia first emerged in the 1960s when the American Safeway company opened its first US designed but Australian-based supermarket in 1964. Over the last four decades this rise of Australian-based global retail space has continued apace with many key retailers, such as 7 Eleven, McDonald’s, Ikea and the Body Shop emerging in the 1970s and 80s (see Humphery 1998: Chs.1-3).

The impact of this emergence is imagined as cultural as much, if not more so, than commercial. And, as the global shop has become an absolutely visible part of Australian urban landscapes, a sense of concern, and of commercial and political opposition, has crept into a public discourse of global consumer space. While the Australian public certainly use and indeed welcome the presence of global shops, there is a certain fragility now in relation to an Australian consumer landscape ‘going global’. It is no coincidence that this fragility is related to the rise of both a political ethos of anti-globalisation and a more widespread popular concern that globalization itself is responsible for a whole set of social ills from job losses to ‘cultural decline’. It is a fragility that can be clearly seen in relation to two of the most recent global arrivals on the Australian consumer scene; Borders and Starbucks.

**The Book and the Beverage**

The North American book giant, Borders, opened its first Australian superstore in the up-market Melbourne suburb of South Yarra in October 1998. Even as it
entered the Australian market, the company was clearly aware of a potential commercial and cultural opposition, insisting that ‘we are not an American bookstore that has been plopped down in the middle of Australia…’ (cited in Finlay 1998). A further store, sprawled over three levels, was opened within the Melbourne-based icon of Australian retailing, Chadstone Shopping Centre, in April 2001.

The global book retailer finally moved into Carlton, Melbourne’s oldest café and university precinct, in November 2002. This opening, however, was accompanied by a considerable outcry, one that was interesting for its mix of commercial concern at the economic impact on other book retailers – particularly the large home-grown independent Readings chain - and a vaguely articulated cultural concern about the unholy alliance between the book and the global shop. As Mark Rubbo, the co-owner of Readings, insisted; ‘I don’t think a business like Borders can champion Australian writing and culture like an Australian business can’. Others voiced similar concerns. One resident, Lloyd Jones, complained that ‘Yet another multinational invades and threatens the harmony of a genuine community’, while one local writer playfully coined the campaign slogan ‘Livres sans Frontieres’ - books without borders (cited in Farouque 2002).

In moving into the Australian market, however, Borders was to have less than a dream run. The company did not actually turn a profit on its Australian stores until 2004 (Webb, 2004). Yet Borders, which by the beginning of 2006 operated 14 stores in Australia, has certainly been part of an increasing corporatisation of bookselling nationwide (Shoebridge 2005).

If books have become a cultural and commercial battleground over globalisation in Australia, so too has the cup of coffee. Aside from the rise of Borders it has been the market entry of the Seattle-based Starbucks company that has garnered most attention. Opening its first store in Australia in 2000 in Sydney’s Hyde Park, the company expanded its Australian operations rapidly and by late-2001, in one of those fatuous statistical moments so beloved of retailing, the company reported that it had sold its one millionth cup of coffee in Australia (House 2001).
But, once again, the emergence of yet another global retailer, this time peddling an apparently good coffee, has not been without ‘local’ opposition – nor has the Starbucks Australian story proved one of easy commercial success. In Sydney’s Balmain district in 2002 a petition was launched to stop Starbucks opening an outlet in the retail and residential hub of Darling Street and the slogan STARSUCKS was liberally utilised (personal observation). Similarly, in Melbourne, news of Starbucks opening (particularly in the major café belts) was greeted with disdain by local café owners and clientele for its efforts to inject a ‘global sameness’ into the coffee experience (Webb 2001).

Much of this initial opposition to Starbucks was, once again, not simply commercially motivated, but also embedded in a sense of cultural affront. Starbucks is well known for its championing of its coffee houses as a Third Place (beyond work and home). But for Australian cafes owners and their clientele this has been seen, at least in some quarters, as selling an experience already on offer to Australians, and moreover rendering that experience shallow. Perhaps for this reason, amongst others, the rise of Starbucks in Australia, as with Borders, has been patchy. Indeed, Australia has proved no prized market for the company compared to Asia, where Starbucks has many hundreds of stores (Shoebridge 2005).

Undoubtedly, as our discussion so far indicates, it has been the objections of local business to the commercial onslaught of the global retailer that has garnered much attention in the Australian media. Yet, as I have already emphasised, much of the commentary cited above is inherently a mixture of commercial and cultural objection which is in fact shared and voiced beyond the confines of local and small business enterprise. Indeed, Borders and Starbucks have received a rather icy reception in Australia in part because of a latent ideological and/or nationalistic opposition amongst inner-city dwellers in particular to having their local shopping precincts go global. Not surprisingly, this opposition is most directly expressed by those active within anti-globalisation movements. And, in illustrating this, I will draw on an interview undertaken for my broader study on anti-consumerism. As this interviewee from a large environmentalist organisation put it in relation to a question which asked if they utilised global retail outlets:
Not if I can help it. I’ve got a cultural issue with them….Well, I’ve got an ethical issue with them, maybe that’s a better word. For lots of reasons, I’m conscious of the impact of those sorts of chains on cultures; on making a monoculture, a world monoculture…where everything’s the same. It’s a consumer culture, it’s an American culture, so I’m opposed to that. So, on that principle alone, I’d prefer not to shop there. Yeah, you know, there are lots of reasons [why I don’t shop in them]. They take business away from local individual shops and local businesses who need jobs, and profits are sent to America or wherever the chain comes from. It’s also mass consumerism, so it’s driving unsustainable consumption because it’s large-scale, things are cheap so people can buy more. They just do everything I’m opposed to basically.

In drawing on this ‘activist’ comment, and in mapping out a commercial and civic opposition to Borders and Starbucks, what I want to suggest in bringing this all too brief section of the paper to a close is that there is an emergent commonality of public concern in face of the globalisation of Australian retailing. Politically poles apart on many issues they may be, but the small business operator, the inner-city café-frequenting professional and the young activist often share a sense of opposition to the global shop. It would be drawing a rather long bow to suggest that Borders and Starbucks have struggled in Australia simply because of such opposition – and it is highly likely that they will eventually commercially succeed on a significant level. Yet, it would be equally rash to downplay the importance of such broad-based local concern, particularly since it can be seen to be connected to a deep, affective sense of place. And it is to this, rather more abstract, issue that I’ll turn to in concluding this paper.

In Place

It was Robert Sack who importantly noted that consumption is both place-creating and place-altering (Sack 2002). Sack recognised places of consumption as terrains of human agency but read modern and postmodern landscapes of (western) consumption as implicated in a severing of connection to the rest of the world and to others rendering contemporary consumption disorienting and preventing the moral evaluation of our consumer actions in terms of their environmental, social and international impact. It is interesting to note that there
has now been a vigorous return to the politics and morality of consumption, at least within the literature on sustainability and anti-consumerism (Princen, Maniates and Conca 2002). It was, though, Sack’s thesis on disorientation and the play between reality and unreality within contemporary consumer landscapes that connected his work to a broader – and very much ongoing - critical tradition within social theory. Of particular note here is the work of writers that have had much to say about the disorienting and fragmenting effects of contemporary consumerism and the places in which it is enacted such as Harvey (1989), Jameson (1991), Augé (1995), Bauman (2005) and others.

Few writers in this tradition have focused specifically on the global shop, but the work of George Ritzer is a notable exception. Indeed, within his most recent work Ritzer designates globalised commercial spaces from McDonald’s to Ikea as non-places by virtue of being ‘centrally conceived and controlled social forms that are comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content’ (Ritzer 2003: xi).

I do not, here, want to simply reject this perspective. It is one that very clearly has resonance with many of the comments cited above from small retailers to anti-globalisation activists, and it remains an important political critique of global capital. But, having said this, a conceptualisation of the global shop as a non-place just won’t quite do. Such a formulation privileges a structural view of shops and shopping that comes perilously close to an asocial, ‘unpeopled’ sociology. As such, it ignores that alternative interpretative stream within the study of consumption that, quite rightly, insists that globalised consumption places are not a priori fragmenting and meaningless. And here we return perhaps to the continued value of culturalist readings of the use to which consumer spaces are put.

The key insights of this orientation, both in relation to the sociality of place and the relations between the local and the global are well rehearsed (see Mansvelt 2005). Place is a social phenomenon, it is not, as discussions of consumer non-places imply, given or precluded by a particular type of building and set of commercial procedures (see Casey 1998: 315.) Similarly, people ‘place’ themselves not simply in the local understood in a concrete sense, but can also do so within network or flows of relations, such that to participate in an
outside’, to move beyond local boundaries, is not antithetical to a sense of belonging (Cook and Crang 1996). As Gaston Bachelard so succinctly put it in 1958, ‘Inhabited space transcends geometrical space’ (Bachelard 1994: 47). Within more recent guise, these ideas are embodied in the rubric notion of transnationalism; that sense in which the life-world can now only be understood and lived, to a greater or lesser extent, as cross-bordered, as beyond a nostalgically understood local (Crang, Dwyer and Jackson 2003; Thrift 2004).

Where, then, does this rather truncated discussion of place and non-place leave us in terms of understanding the place of the global shop? It leaves us with the need to move well beyond sterile dichotomies between a view of global commercial space as a permanently contentless, dominating and homogenising force and a view of it as subject to a ‘glocalised’, almost voluntaristic remaking of its social meanings and effects. There is no simple opposition here. One can insist that we treat the global shop as a potentially socially dynamic place, but we must equally insist that commodity capitalism is a powerful framing force that renders such places, if not non-existent, then at least highly problematic in terms of their ability to sustain a rich, textured everyday life. Rather than high-handedly render the global shop a non-place, we thus need to ask: what possibilities for the making of place does global commercial space give rise to, and what affective responses does such space encourage in terms of its claim to be place?

We can begin to answer these questions by drawing on the documentation of responses offered in this paper. Global shops are, for many, places to be used and enjoyed, but what I have emphasised here is the fact that their presence gives rise as well to a quite general public discourse of nation, community and commercial practice that is marked by a sense of unease. This latter response is in part driven by notions of unfair competition and/or by a political opposition to a perceived globalisation. Yet this unease is embedded also in the affective and the ontological. Contemporary place must now straddle an interaction between place as containment, place as unbounded, and place as utterly extended across global space. The reaction of many to the global shop is embedded in the unreconcilable tensions between these experiences of place. The global shop for some, perhaps many, is simply too transnationally
stretched-out across global space to provide for us a sense (in quite an Aristotelian way) of being ‘held’ in place. As such, global shops may well be places that people move through, enact certain events within, have a knowledge and memory of, but ultimately they are surely unable to actually rival on any sustained level the ontological security, the positive affects, of more embedded places.

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