



Atmospheres of consumption: Shopping as *involuntary vulnerability*



Stephen Healy

The School of Humanities, University of New South Wales, Kensington, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Shopping is predominantly characterised as an activity realized by purposive subjects in which emotion is sometimes identified as a contributory factor. This article argues that contemporary retail environments also promote shopping through affective forces that facilitate the subdual of intentional subjectivity. It is shown how, in addition to stimulating purposive subjects, the affective atmosphere of these spaces may regulate the auto-affective attention of potential shoppers exposing them to further, relatively unfocused inducements to shop. This quality of the affective atmosphere of these spaces is explored through a focus upon the ambient 'platform' air conditioning provides for this achievement. The discussion explores the implications for the affective, subjective and bio-political dimensions of the socio-material assemblages constituting contemporary consumption more generally.

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1. Introduction

Malls affect people. They're designed to. But in some ways, either by their nature or by a side effect caused by their main ingredients, they do things to people that people are unaware of or don't understand, but if they knew or understood, they probably wouldn't like it (Kowinski, 2002: 399–400).

Shopping is predominantly characterised as an enterprise accomplished by purposive subjects intent on instrumental requirements and/or social imperatives. Emotion is sometimes identified in, for example, the way shopping is related to processes of building and maintaining identity (Illouz, 2009), or perceptions of status and self-worth (Rafferty, 2011). This article identifies another dynamic at play in contemporary retail spaces involving the subdual of intentional subjectivity through affective forces that act to expose potential shoppers to further, relatively unfocused inducements to shop. Going beyond existing work describing how contemporary retail spaces are engineered to promote shopping (e.g. Goss, 1993; Manzo, 2005; see also, in particular, Adey, 2008 on airports) it is proposed that, in addition to stimulating purposive subjects, the affective atmosphere of these spaces may regulate the auto-affective attention of potential shoppers making them more vulnerable to a variety of further inducements to shop.

Few analyses of shopping engage with affective and material considerations of the kind explored here. A recent study by Rose et al. (2010) is one exception that mobilises the notion of 'feeling' to interrogate the strengths and weaknesses of actor network theory (ANT) compared with 'affect theory' analyses. Their analysis of UK malls finds that while 'affect theory' is insufficiently attentive to 'rationality,' understood in terms of the interrogative role of subjectivity (346), ANT might "learn from the emphasis on multiplicity that characterizes accounts of affect" (347). While this account supports their conclusion that analysts "would do well to work with a richer and more complex sense of ... human entrainment in buildings" (346) it also suggests that their identification of three components to the 'feeling' of the malls they examined¹ underplays the complex multiplicity of their affective character.

One problem such integrative analyses face is that the available "cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect" remains underdeveloped relative to that available for matters of emotion and feeling (Massumi, 2002: 27). Rose et al. (2010) make an important

¹ "Firstly, there is ... the feel of affect: a more-or-less intense field of assemblages, in which the shopping centres are cohered into a smooth, light, glossy and grey building in which bodies must continually be on the move in linear flows. Secondly, we have asserted the importance of feelings in buildings ... the things that people feel in relation with both the building and their own memories. These emotions can be weak or strong, straightforward or contradictory. And finally ... feelings about buildings ... the considered, reflexive opinions that people hold of buildings, often based on comparisons with other remembered buildings" (Rose et al., 2010: 346).

E-mail address: s.healy@unsw.edu.au.

contribution in exploring how affective considerations intersect with more conventional normatively framed ones.² This article does not seek to delineate precisely how the dynamics of shopping identified here intersects with more conventional accounts but assumes, following Rose et al. (2010), that the two are complementary. This assumption also echoes the stance on non-intentional subjectivity drawn upon here that views such vulnerable states as an inevitable complement to the purposive subjectivity generally grounding work across the social sciences and humanities (Harrison, 2008).

Harrison (2008: 424) asserts that the pervasive preoccupation with purposive, intentional subjectivity marginalises the significance of passivity, exposure, susceptibility and vulnerability, other than as a “prelude to action”. While Harrison (2008: 424) is “concerned with phenomena such as ... lassitude, exhaustion, and sleep” this analysis argues that the affective atmosphere of contemporary retail spaces can induce a corresponding state. Corresponding because, echoing Harrison’s assertion that bodies “[i]n their sensate materiality ... become overwhelmed” (425) in such states, these spaces involuntarily engage the affective sensibilities of potential shoppers so as to open them to enticements to shop further than they had originally anticipated.

Affect is pivotal to this account because it is distinguished from the more commonly subjectively conceived notions of emotion and feeling, with which it is associated, by its dependence “on a sense of push in the world” (Thrift, 2004: 64). This might be the “pull and push of place” (Duff, 2010: 893) or of bodies or other entities in particular places. Affect is, thus, relationally constituted and “does not reside in an object or a body, but surfaces from somewhere in-between” (Adey, 2008: 439) emerging “as a relation between bodies, objects, and technologies” (Bissell, 2010: 272). However, affects tend to ‘push’ relationships in some directions rather than others. To be concerned with affect, therefore, is to highlight corporeal, experiential and material considerations commonly overlooked in accounts focused by the notions of emotion and/or feeling. The concern with the affective dimensions of spaces and places explored here resonates with recent thinking about affect, place and practice including the concept of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010) and recent work on the affective imbrication of place and practice (e.g. Bissell, 2008, 2010; Duff, 2010).

The concept of affective atmospheres highlights the affectively charged quality of certain spaces and places (Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010). Anderson (2009: 78) describes them as “simultaneously indeterminate and determinate ... a class of experience that occur[s] before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions”. Potentially acting as a “shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge” (Anderson, 2009: 78) they can shape circumstances in the sense of giving rise to a “propensity ... pull or a charge that might emerge ... which might (or might not) generate particular events and actions, feelings and emotions” (Bissell, 2010: 273). While these collective affective influences may, as Brennan (2004) argues, have a basis in biology they can be manipulated in the pursuit of specific outcomes.

Architecture is one means to this end (e.g. Adey, 2008; Allen, 2006; Kraftl and Adey, 2008) that Kraftl and Adey (2008: 226) argue can both “engender ... new fields of virtual potential ...

[and] ... simultaneously delimit, design(ate), and demarcate strict performative and often moral possibilities”. Duff (2010: 881–882) flags a similar capacity in describing affective atmospheres as capturing “the store of action-potential, the dispositions and agencies, potentially enactable in them”, while Thrift (2004: 68) suggests a “microbiopolitics of the subliminal” that might be understood to underpin attempts to mold the ‘possibilities’ depicted by Kraftl and Adey (2008). This article focuses upon one aspect of the affective atmosphere of contemporary retail spaces – the form of thermal comfort generated by air conditioning – in order to investigate how it might contribute to the possibility of shopping.

Comfort is particularly germane here because although there is a “lack of consensus on what comfort actually is” (Bissell, 2008: 1699) its history is closely aligned to that of contemporary consumption. Crowley (1999, 2001, 2003), the preeminent historian of comfort, asserts that the predominant contemporary understanding of comfort as a sense of “self-conscious satisfaction with the relationship between one’s body and its immediate physical environment” (1999: 750) developed circa 1700 and “gave meaning” (2001: 143) to the eighteenth century consumer revolution (142–149). Prior to this the term had “referred primarily to psychological and spiritual, not physical, circumstance” (69) with political economy making “comfort a legitimising motive for popular consumption patterns” in the first half of the eighteenth century (143). The sensibility of physical comfort articulated innovative relationships between minds, bodies and material entities forming some of the more significant assemblages involved in the new consuming practices.³ Crowley notes that comfort:

had to be taught and learned ... [and] ... drew the attention of political economists, moral philosophers, scientists, humanitarian reformers, even novelists ... [who] ... gave ... *comfort* ... a new physical emphasis as they reconceptualised values, redesigned material environments, and urged the relearning of behaviours (Crowley, 2003: 135).

So although physical comfort is today widely assumed to reflect innate human traits and dispositions its naturalisation involved considerable time, effort, institutional support and resources.

Bissell (2008: 1700) has recently developed three interrelated definitions of comfort through an analysis of sitting in a chair: ‘an objective capacity’, ‘an aesthetic sensibility’ and ‘an affective resonance’. He relates the first of these to Crowley’s (2003) work, noting that it “was engendered partly by the consumer revolution during the eighteenth century” (Bissell, 2008: 1700). “An aesthetic definition of comfort builds on the objective ... but considers more seriously the relationality of the object and particular user” with marketing and “the remit of architects” singled out as specific examples of this ‘aesthetic sensibility’ (Bissell, 2008: 1700). However, comfort as an ‘affective resonance’:

move[s] away from comfort as objectified or as intentional and instead present[s] comfort as a complex set of affective resonances circulated through a variety of tactile, visual and audio media. Comfort is no longer an attribute of an object but more a set of anticipatory affective resonances where the body has the capacity to anticipate and fold through and into the physical sensation of the engineered environment promoted (Bissell, 2008: 1701).

This analysis elaborates Bissell’s use of Cooper’s (1998) description of the way early movie theatres used air conditioning

² For example: “[w]e found ample evidence of the affective materiality of the centres in Milton Keynes thinning out in moments of sociability, when the bodies of the centres’ visitors were no longer constituted in large part with the buildings’ materiality but rather more with other things – talk, daughters, food, laughter, phones – when other affects, and other things, are induced” (Rose et al., 2010: 344).

³ A good early example are the social protocols that evolved in tandem with the utensils/tableware associated with the consumption of the, then still relatively novel, hot beverages tea and coffee.

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