Daniel Miller

Chapter 35

MAKING LOVE IN SUPERMARKETS (1998)


Editor’s introduction

Over recent years Daniel Miller has promoted the study of material culture as a practice that grounds the anthropology of modernity in the things that circulate in everyday life. In this section from his book on shopping, Miller is concerned with the daily shopping habits of north Londoners. Miller’s approach to the performance of shopping is to look for what might be thought of as the deep structures at work in the everyday. By suggesting that shopping is an affective practice based in ‘love’ and ‘sacrifice’ Miller uses a language more familiarly used for describing sacred rights. In this insistence that an anthropological language fashioned through contact with tribal communities can ‘fit’ the seemingly secular and rationalised world of western-style shopping, Miller performs the classic move of ‘making the familiar strange’. This defamiliarising of everyday conventions allows the mundane to be seen as a vehicle for values and meanings that might at first glance seem excessive – yet it is precisely this way that Miller recognises a crucial feature of the everyday life of secular modernity.

From this perspective secular modernity does not simply abandon religious values, rather those values migrate and dissipate into more secular and everyday realms. Birth, death, sacrifice, guilt, all those passionate intensities that were once the province of religion, have migrated into more earthly spaces. Television, for instance, is saturated by police and medical dramas: where once we were shepherded off the earth by various essays of the Gods, in a secular society the best we can hope for is a good-looking, sympathetic and not too desperately overworked doctor. In secular modernity the commodity fetish is quite literally a talisman invested with magical powers, a token in a cosmology of meanings and effects.

Material cultural studies as practised by Miller and others combines a range of approaches. If here the emphasis is on evidencing the sacred in the everyday (see Chapter 36
for this as well), material cultural studies is also concerned to track things as they circulate within the global networks of advancing world capitalism.


FOR MANY PURPOSES the main division in the street where I conducted fieldwork lies between the council estates on one side and the private housing on the other. But the significance of this division cannot always be assumed. Although she lives in an owner-occupied maisonette, Mrs Wynn comes across immediately as quintessentially working class. Her husband is an electrician but has been unemployed for several months owing to an injury. She is a childminder, taking into her home other people's children while they are out working. Between his injury and the fact that someone recently ran into their car while it was parked outside their house, they were not having an easy time of it. Nevertheless, as often proved to be the case, her concerns in shopping bear little upon the contingencies of the moment, and relate more to longer-term issues surrounding the personal development of each member of the family. She was pretty fed up with the consequences of these unexpected events, but shopping as a topic drew her back to things that at one level were more mundane. But these were relationships which she cared about a great deal and was constantly thinking about and forming strategies to deal with. In conversation she notes:

A1: My husband is quite fussy vegetable wise and he's a big meat eater, but yes I've been doing a lot of stir fries because I found I could get him to eat a lot more vegetables if I do stir fries, and he likes Chinese. He likes spicy stuff. He's got a lot better than when I first met him because his mum's Irish and overcooked everything and was very basic and he's got so much better in the years.

Q: Do the kids eat the same as him?
A: No. Jack my son's got very fussy, definitely in the last year. I would say he's a good vegetable and fruit eater but he's the basic chips and burger and I'm afraid so.

Q: Do you cook separately for them?
A: Pasta he loves pasta. Yes, and separate times as well.

Later on in the same conversation she notes:

A: I try not to buy a lot of convenience [foods], I do buy meat that is marinated and stuff like that and then think what can I do with it, but now and again I will sit down and get my books out and have a look. I did it last week just because I was getting a bit tired of things. But also what I will do is buy the sauces and the stir-fry things, stuff like that, and then just add it to everything so it makes a bit of difference, but I seem to get stuck doing the same things over and over again. So, every now and then, I've got to get my books out to remind myself or think of some new things.

Q: Is it you that's bored?
A: No. He will say as well, we've had this a bit too much, I'm a great chicken eater and he says chicken again!
ourselfs as living lives directed to goals and values which remain in some sense higher than the mere dictates of instrumentality. Daily decisions are constantly weighed in terms of moral questions about good and bad action indicated in traits such as sensitiv-

ity as against style, or generosity as against jealousy. Though these may not be made explicit, the accounts we use to understand each other's actions depend on the continued existence of cosmology as a realm of transcendent value.

The terms 'cosmology' and 'transcendence' suggest values that are long lasting and opposed to the contingency of everyday life. They are intended to imply that although we focus upon the particular persons, children, partners and friends who occupy our concerns at a given moment of time, the way we relate to them is much influenced by more general beliefs about what social relations should look like and how they should be carried out. At one level then, love is a model of one particular type of identification and attachment. It is one we are socialised into and constantly informed about.

This ideal is then triggered by an individual, such as a family member who makes it manifest. A relationship then builds its own specificity and nuances which (sometimes) goes well beyond the transcendental model with which we started. When the term 'love' is used, here, in a more general sense, actual relationships are found to develop on the basis of much wider norms and expectations which pre-exist and remain after the relationship itself.

The term 'love' then indicates more than a claim to affection made during courtship. It stands for a much wider field of that to which life is seen as properly devoted. In later parts of this essay it will be more closely related back to devotional practices in which the term 'cosmology' is more obviously appropriate since the context is more clearly that of religion. The ethnography suggested that just as devotion is the taken-for-granted backdrop to the carrying out of religious rites in other times and places, so in North London love remains as a powerful taken-for-granted foundation for acts of shopping which will be argued to constitute devotional rites whose purpose is to create desiring subjects.

I would call Mrs Wynn a housewife, even though for the present she is the sole wage-earner of the family, because, for her, housewifery is her principal raison d'être. As feminist research has made clear, a person such as Mrs Wynn is more likely to view her earnings as simply part of her housewifery than as a job equivalent to that which her husband would be engaged in were he fit. As someone who identifies with being a housewife, the requests made by her for particular foods are not viewed with resentment but are in fact desired by her. This is made quite explicit in another conversation with a working-class Cypriot woman.

Q: Do you enjoy cooking?
A: Yes, I do. I'm not afraid I do.
Q: Does your family appreciate it?
A: Oh yes, they do they love the food, my daughter when she comes home she says 'Oh mum food', she opens the fridge as soon as she comes in.
Q: Is your husband particular?
A: Oh he doesn't like very hot, very spicy food, but no he just eats what he's given really.
Q: Does he make any requests?
A: Oh I wish he would! No he doesn't t.
Here, as is so often the case, there is no evident resentment at being identified unambiguously with housewifery. On the other hand, there is a considerable desire that this should be appreciated by the family members, and not taken for granted. A specific request for an item when shopping is taken as a kind of bringing into consciousness of the role played by the shopper and is most often viewed positively, even if it becomes a cause of contention. The subsequent argument is itself an opportunity for the housewife to demonstrate that she is only contradicting the request because of how much she cares for the person and therefore the consequences of what she buys.

In general, the problem many housewives expressed was the lack of valorization, most particularly of the moral, educative and provisioning roles that housewives see as of immense importance. They would not normally use the term 'love' for such concerns, but it is clear from what they do say, that it is love alone that can satisfactorily legitimize their devotion to this work. It is also clear that to be satisfactory the subjects of love should desire and acknowledge that which the housewife sees as her ordinary devotional duty.

In the [1980s and 1990s] we have become far better informed about the work involved in keeping a home going and activities such as shopping. This is almost entirely thanks to a series of important empirical studies of housework inspired by the feminist critique of housewifery as valorized labour. Within a short time a normative pattern was uncovered and well-documented which suggested that women tended to be largely responsible for the basic provisioning of the household, while men tended to be responsible mainly for extra items that were of particular interest to themselves, but were relatively unimportant in, for example, provisioning for children. Male work outside the home was found to be fully acknowledged through wages and through an endorsement of its centrality to the maintenance of the home as in the phrase 'bring ing home the bacon'. By contrast, women's work in the home was not only unpaid but even the homemaker tended to downplay the sheer weight of labour involved in keeping house. This degree of exploitation and the asymmetry of power was reinforced rather than redressed in consumption, where housewives were found to give the best of their labour in meals and comforts to others while often denying themselves the pleasure they strove to create for others.

In general, our fieldwork revealed similar patterns to those uncovered in this previous work, and merely demonstrates that these generalizations still largely hold for the 1990s in this area of North London. Our research thereby also confirms the main conclusion of these other studies as to the basic asymmetry of housework and the exploitation of female labour. By the same token these previous studies provide the bulk evidence for the centrality of love and care as the ideology behind mundane domestic activities such as shopping, to which this case study becomes merely an additional exemplification. The primary examples are these highly conventional expressions of care and concern within households. But there is a wide range of other ways in which love is expressed. Examples include love within egalitarian couples, by the elderly, between friends, siblings and a gamut of other relationships. Even if love is extended to this degree, however, I am obviously not claiming it is ubiquitous. Not every shopping practice is about love; there are others that relate more to selfishness, hedonism, tradition and a range of other factors. What I will claim, however, is that love is not only normative but easily dominant as the context and motivation for the bulk of actual shopping practice.

Notes
1 Throughout this essay 'A' is the informant's answer to a question and 'Q' is the question asked. The speech is reported verbatim and I have not tried to convert it into formal grammar or 'accepted' word.
2 Examples for Britain start with Oakley (1976), and a good selection of the genre may be found collected together in Jackson and Moores (1995). Feminist research is complemented by other genres of sociological research of which Finch (1989) is a particularly important representative and whose results have largely confirmed the centrality of woman as carer and worker within the family.