Worshipping Bodies: Affective Labour in the Hillsong Church

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Abstract
The Australian megachurch, Hillsong, is as well known for its music and spectacle as it is for the content of its religious ideas. This is largely due, as Connell argues in his geography of Hillsong, to the peculiar mix of the theological and the modern that a highly globalised and mediatised context can today produce. This paper re-examines the phenomenon of Hillsong through the theory of affect, which has gained notable analytical purchase in geography in recent years. More specifically, it uses the concept of ‘affective labour’ to analyse the specific ways in which bodies are put to work in the spaces of Hillsong worship. We demonstrate the way that Hillsong produces and mobilises affect in order to attain the collective experience of the spectacle, which is so crucial to Hillsong’s visibility as a social phenomenon and also to its recruitment of the individual member into the logic and ethos of the church as a whole. We indicate the importance for the success of Hillsong of producing particular kinds of subject, namely, subjects who are at once comfortable, enthusiastic and loyal. By recruiting its followers as affective labourers towards a shared evangelical cause, the embodied and vaguely felt sense of potential of members is mobilised towards the spectacular phenomenon that is the Hillsong church.

KEY WORDS affect; embodiment; religion; Pentecostalism; spectacle

Introduction
Despite the fact that the Australian megachurch, Hillsong, is one of the largest and better known of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God churches in Australia or indeed of any evangelical organisation, it remains a relatively understudied phenomenon. In geography, John Connell’s (2005) study of the church is a notable exception. Connell’s (2005, 315) contribution to what he calls the ‘neglected religious geography of Australia’ situates Hillsong as a civic social institution with both local and global features. This paper seeks to extend Connell’s work on Hillsong church by exploiting a growing interest in geography in the theory of affect.1 Some 20 years after Kong’s (1990) suggestion that a crucial question for the ‘geography of religion’ concerns the process by which the spiritual comes ‘to be expressed and conveyed, particularly in an area of human life where words are presumably an inadequate way of expressing feeling’, the concept of affect offers potentially rich insights. If the diverse and changing spiritual forms in contemporary society might be studied from the point of view of the religious ideologies they express, much can also be learned from an analysis of the affective dynamics that play out within their distinctive spatial environments. It is with this in mind that this paper seeks to explore the peculiar expressions of spirituality within the affective space of the Hillsong church. More specifically, our aim is to better understand the role that the congregation plays in the Hillsong
spectacle as contributors to the vitality of the Hillsong experience, as loyal enthusiasts for the cause and as recruiters of new church members. Through their ‘affective labour’ (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2001; 2004), the congregation show Hillsong to be an especially contemporary social form. While dimensions of our argument could certainly be extended beyond the context of Hillsong to contemporary evangelism more generally, our own interest is in drawing out the specificities of this Australian empirical case study. The Hillsong church was originally established in 1983 as the ‘Hills Christian Life Centre’ in Baulkham Hills, Sydney, by husband and wife pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston who continue as head pastors today. The more market-friendly moniker of ‘Hillsong’ did not come into existence until 1999, a portmanteau derived from the major campus at Baulkham Hills and Church’s growing reputation as a producer of Christian music. The church today boasts two main campuses in Sydney, ‘Hills’ and ‘City’, along with a third, smaller campus in Campbelltown (‘South West’) and another in Brisbane. Hillsong states that from an initial congregation of 45 in 1983, today the two main campuses in Sydney regularly attract a total attendance on any given weekend of over 21 000 people (Hillsong Church, 2011a).

One of the main drivers behind this exponential growth has been the music arm of the organisation. Hillsong is recognised worldwide for its Christian music and is among the highest selling and most prolific producers of Christian music in the world, releasing over 40 albums and selling over 11 million units since 1988 (http://distribution.hillsong.com/help/about). In addition to the music arm of the church, Hillsong also provides Christian ‘resources’ (at a price) including DVDs, CDs, mp3s, rights to downloadable content, podcasts and vodcasts of their teachings, along with broadcasting a television programme ‘... in over a 180 countries and territories around the world!’ (http://hillsongtv.com/screeningtimes). This embrace of various media enables rapid global penetration of their particular ‘brand’, which, along with the church’s physical, franchise-style presence across the globe, mimics the practices of retail-based corporations, as well as those of other megachurches, particularly those in the United States (see Roof 1999; Coleman, 2000; Einstein, 2008).

While much could be said about the beliefs and values embodied in Hillsong, its relationship to the basic tenets of Pentecostalism and so on, our interest in this paper is not so much with the beliefs, nor indeed the ideology, of Hillsong, but rather with the affective elements of the phenomenon. To anticipate our overall argument, our claim is that the functioning of Hillsong is inseparable from the production of affective spectacle within the space of the church environs, which, as Connell (2005) notes, must be seen in both its local and global context. This production, we suggest, involves a deployment of affective labour. In pursuing this argument, we demonstrate the way that Hillsong produces and mobilises affect in order to attain the collective experience of the spectacle, which is so crucial to Hillsong’s visibility as a social phenomenon and also to its recruitment of the individual member into the logic and ethos of the church as a whole. We also indicate the importance for the success of Hillsong of producing particular kinds of subject, namely, subjects who are at once comfortable, enthusiastic and loyal.

Labouring for the affective spectacle

In his famous thesis on modern society as a ‘society of the spectacle’, Debord (1977) argues that the capitalist mode of production and ideology mediates social relations through assemblages of images, spectacles that impoverish and ultimately negate real life. In suggesting that Hillsong produces affective spectacles, we affirm Debord’s interest in the spectacle as a social phenomenon while emphasising its affective, rather than ideological, operations. In the case of Hillsong, we argue that participants are directly involved in the production of the spectacle, which is not to say that they have overcome the false consciousness that is so crucial to the operation of the spectacle in Debord’s essentially Marxist analysis. Rather, it is not principally at the ideological level nor is it through consciousness that the affective spectacle operates. The production of affective spectacle involves a modulation of bodily potentials and, in this sense, Hillsong exemplifies the kind of affective power that Massumi (2002a) and others have convincingly argued to be such a feature of contemporary society.²

From the typical 3500-capacity weekend service of Hillsong to the 20 000 strong ‘rallies’ during annual conferences, Hillsong produces spectacular affairs rivalling in sensory stimulation any other contemporary form of entertainment.³ Although services give the appearance of informality, they are in fact tightly structured and carefully managed events (Connell, 2005), which
provides both a form of apparent spontaneity yet comforting familiarity with services rarely deviating ‘from the music-message-music-donations-music-altar call-music pattern’ (McIntyre, 2007, 179). As Duffy and Permezel (2007, 370) note, music ‘shapes and creates our awareness of space both through its acoustic properties and its cultural codes, and the symbolic structures assembled within the way these sounds are assembled’ (Duffy and Permezel, 2007, 373). Beyond this, music operates at an affective level, working through bodies and adding intensity to events (Shouse, 2005).

Lighting and stage effects are abundant within the space of the Hillsong church and the rigorously rehearsed live band that leads worship is supported by a choir numbering at least two dozen, more during special events. Services begin with a series of worship songs, which are highly produced, ‘catchy’ numbers, contemporary pop/rock in style. The songs segue seductively into each other, gradually stoking the excitement of the congregants. Following 20–30 minutes of music, a pastor will enter the stage, building up the congregation’s anticipation with evocative invocations such as ‘Are you desperate for God to move in your life? In your family? In your Health? In your Finances?’ (Connell, 2005, 322). Throughout these impassioned pleas, the band continues to play in the background, increasing the intensity of the music as the pastor nears the climax of his/her speech in a method so seamless and synergistic one can only assume it has been planned down to the finest detail. Having slowly built the collective tension of the audience in a gradual and controlled method, the collective cacophony of the pastor and the music reaches a crescendo of emotional outpouring. A state of near ecstasy is observed in many congregants, but this gradually eases to an almost austere calm, which is seemingly felt throughout the congregation, aided and tacitly encouraged by the now slowed tempo of the music.

In the convention centre-style setting and décor, dark colours and low lighting dominate, particularly during musical interludes, and this supports the individual in his or her quest for transcendence to a spiritual plane (Goh, 2008). During worship, the audience heaves, swells and sways rhythmically to the music, often with one or both hands in the air and eyes closed. The personal relationship with the divine, manifested on a felt level in a manner characteristic of Pentecostalism, is expressed in a unified, spectacular and peculiarly affective manner.

As much geographical literature on affect in recent years has stressed, affect is characterised by a felt, but not consciously grasped, potential or capacity, a bodily, rather than rationally sensed empowerment operating in the present and oriented to the immediate future. Certainly, the impact of the Hillsong experience on participants can be of this vaguely perceived nature, producing a sense of ‘being on the cutting edge of something’ (Connell, 2005, 322). The inability to articulate exactly what this ‘something’ is, while vaguely recognising its effects, is characteristic of the embodied, rather than cognitive, quality of affect. As Massumi (2002b) has stressed, affect is more than the surface recognition of ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’ as drivers of action. Rather, affect can be likened to a kind of physics of experience, the potential energy of the social world residing in ourselves, others, and the interplay between the two (Massumi, 2002b). Affect is always relational; the potential and empowering aspect of affect is that we possess the dual capacity of affecting and being affected (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In this constant interplay, our bodily potential is in flux, reacting and shifting in relation to variations in our capacities, as well as our felt perception of these transitions (Hardt, 2007). This, as Massumi (2002a) puts it, constitutes the ‘doubling’ of affect.

Two points outlined above are particularly important to the analysis of Hillsong. The first is that of the difference between affect and emotion. It would be relatively easy to explain the fervour and ecstasy of a typical Hillsong gathering as simply an outward manifestation of the evangelical mindset and specifically the joy one feels to be part of an ‘elect’. Yet, one of the key preoccupations that we might associate with the ‘affective turn’ (Clough and Halley, 2007) would be the attempt to grasp the primacy and ‘autonomy of affect’ (Massumi, 2002a) and an important element of the Hillsong phenomenon is its affective dynamic, which is always more than its expression in subjective emotions.

The second point concerns the doubling and relational aspects of affect. Many Hillsongers are drawn to, and sustained within, the church through a vaguely felt sense of potential. This is not simply the hopes that individuals might invest in the church at a resolutely personal level but concerns the potential for a superior kind of self-actualisation through the subsumption of the self within a cause greater than themselves. Personal experiences, then, whether driven by the self-interest of salvation or the desire for subsumption...
Within the church, are both product and cause of the Hillsong experience. Their genesis is unthinkable outside the context of the collective affective experience and they also circulate back into Hillsong as a whole, both changing and contributing to the church’s production of affect.

No doubt Hillsong caters to seekers at a rational and cognitive level, through teachings that align its evangelical aims with a recognisably contemporary form of ‘self-help’ individualism (see Houston, 1999a; 1999b; 2008). Yet, the operations of affect are crucial to the production of ‘Hillsong’ as a distinctly collective phenomenon and, in this, the ordinary members of Hillsong play an especially important role. To the extent that Hillsong is both a theological and capitalist enterprise, the congregation of believers effectively serve as affective labourers for the church. Affective labour has been described as a form of ‘immaterial labour’, a concept developed to recognise that increasingly the ‘real’ substance of commodities is determined by their cultural content, which is intangible but vital to the creation of contemporary products as well as subjectivities (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt, 1999). While critics of the theory of immaterial labour have pointed out the continued and increasingly imiserated character of material labour (Wright, 2005), an attention to the immaterial and affective dimensions of contemporary labour does go some way in grasping what is new in the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy, namely, an increasing focus on the social and cultural content of the commodity and the associated production of subjectivity (Dowling et al., 2007).

As Klein (2001) has famously noted, modern commercial branding represents in many ways an attempt by marketers to escape the limiting corporeal bounds of their product. For Hillsong, the ultimate products on offer (meaning and salvation) are themselves immaterial in nature. The challenge, then, is to attach these products to the immateriality of the Hillsong brand and, in this, the congregation of existing and potential believers play a crucial role. When Hardt (1999, 8) speaks of the ‘distinctly ontological quality’ of affect he is especially concerned with the way that affective labour becomes enrolled in the production of subjectivity. As Massumi (2002b, 20) puts it, ‘the product, ultimately, is us’. The description of church goers as affective labourers enrolled into the production of subjectivity is, perhaps, less jarring in the case of Hillsong than it might be in many other, and especially more traditional, religious contexts. That Hillsong is a capitalist as well as theological enterprise is obvious at a number of levels, though perhaps nowhere more so than in the spatial organisation of the megachurch setting, which resembles a mall, corporate headquarters or convention centre with its sparse and modular design (Goh, 2008, 292), its showcasing of Hillsong products and support of chain stores such as Gloria Jeans (Connell, 2005, 328).

There is an explicit rationale for this design within the philosophy of a seeker-oriented megachurch, driven largely by ideals of modern marketing and with an eye to the affective atmosphere conducive to the recruitment of seekers as believers and consumers of the Hillsong experience. Rather than proselytising to the ‘unsaved’, the aim is to first gain the attention, and then the respect of the ‘seeker’ (Twitchell, 2004; Einstein, 2008), while also avoiding any kind of ‘cultural shock’ that may deter further inquiry (Ellingson, 2010, 254).

Hillsong achieves its aim of attracting seekers through the use of contemporary music styles, dazzling theatre and charismatic speakers, which are at least as media as they are message based. Its eschewal of elaborate or rigidly traditional iconography and morbid symbolism, lest these jar with the sensibilities of the seeker demographic (Goh, 2008), raises the dilemma of how Hillsong can make its faith palpable, outwardly manifest to reinforce the beliefs of the already inculcated while also serving as a kind of advertisement for the seeker. Here, the role of ‘edutainment’ (Ellingson, 2010, 254) is crucial: performance, music, simple repetitive lyrics (projected upon screens also showing worship leaders rather than a dour hymn book) with gratuitous use of personal pronouns and other vagaries (McIntyre, 2007), which seek to capture the interest of the seeker and ensure that ‘there will never be a dull moment’ (Sargeant, 2000, 31). Hillsong is quite explicit in its orientation towards impressive spectacle:

What we wanna do is bring something excellent, and the whole aim is to make sure that our worship services are fantastic, and they’re ALL seeker-friendly. . . a lot of church settings have a 100 songs, a 100 songs! But it’s probably good to just cut it back down to five, or just six songs, so that your whole small team can learn those songs really, really, really well. . . . Now, remember we’re not singing to the congregation, we’re singing to people that are coming in. . . . We’re trying to make sure that
the next person that comes in, the next visitor that comes in, is seeing that what we’re doing we’re doing GREAT . . . (Hillsong Conference 2010, Session 72, 2010a)

This market-driven approach to evangelism is reflected in the overwhelming use of spectacle and the mobilisation of the congregation as ‘free’ labour, which is crucially involved in the formation of ‘particular compositions of bodies’ (Coté and Pybus, 2007: 90), the cultivation of a palpable openness among seekers and devotees to affecting and being affected, the forging of relationships and the production of new subjectivities. Ultimately, the affective labour of the congregation works to make seekers feel the comfort of being ‘at home’ while generating contagious enthusiasm and fomenting loyalty beyond reason.

Comfortable, enthusiastic and loyal subjects
Comfort, as Bissell (2008) notes, can be understood from three distinct, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, perspectives. Comfort may be considered as a quality of objects, as an ‘aesthetic sensibility’ brought into being through bodies or as an ‘affective resonance’ that circulates ‘between and through both bodies and objects’ (Bissell, 2008, 1701). In the case of Hillsong, the attempt to render comfort objective can be seen in the familiarly consumerist design of the non-worship areas of the church, which, married with merchandise promising the extension of the Hillsong experience into the home, put seekers and devotees alike at ease. At the level of comfort as an aesthetic sensibility, one can note the effects of the avoidance of overt symbolism or arcane language within the specifically worship-oriented areas, which ties the sense of comfort during worship to the immediacy of embodied, felt experience. The sparsely decorated ‘arena’ of worship appears as a kind of empty shell, waiting to be filled with the experience of spiritual transcendence and providing an anticipation that ‘the best is yet to come’ (Hillsong Conference 2011 promotional tagline, 2010b).

However, it is at the level of a specific affective resonance that the generation of comfort most clearly aligns with the seeker-church’s quite explicit concern with growth. While Hillsong in Australia has worked hard to attach its brand to place, often evocatively and emotively pairing the church with the city of Sydney or the nation with the intention of embedding itself within the cultural landscape of the city (Goh, 2008), it marries these efforts with distinctly nationalistic sentiments yet simultaneously internationalist ambitions. This preoccupation with growth is much more, however, than a mere corporate concern, being profoundly tied up with the very philosophy of the church and entering freely into the discourse of the church’s ‘ordinary’ members (Houston, 1999b, 2008a). Herein lies the importance of the contagious elements of affective labour, the way in which comfort, as a ‘specific affective resonance’, is circulated so as to produce a palpably collective and apparently spontaneous compulsion to participate in the collective outpouring, expressed as singing, dancing, joining hands and so on.

Hillsong, then, needs not only to produce comfortable subjects, but enthusiastic ones. According to Bachmann and Wittel (2009), enthusiasm is ‘one of the most precious commodities in the creative industries’, among which Hillsong clearly belongs. The enthusiastic labourer is only too happy to ‘go the extra mile’ for the institution (Wissinger, 2007). With its emphasis on proselytising and spreading, not only the word but perhaps, more importantly, the intensity associated with the experience, Hillsong requires that church members become willing vehicles of enthusiasm. Mobilised towards the church’s aims of evangelism, enthusiasm can in this way ‘create a surplus of labour and a surplus of value, thus a surplus of productivity’ as ‘enthusiasm not only leads to an increase of productivity, it can be productive itself’ (Bachmann and Wittel, 2009).

Certainly, those who do not visibly contribute to the affective labour of the church, either through adding to the fervour of seeker-driven services or by paying witness to the benefits of being ‘saved’ during their daily lives, may find themselves subject to subtle judgements by church leaders and fellow members (Houston, 2008b). This mix of affective and normative power is largely successful; both leaders and adherents are acutely conscious of their overarching goal to evangelise to the ‘unsaved’ as given by the Great Commission and that their success in this mission is determined largely by their ability to engage seekers. Thus, with the mentality of always being seeker friendly, Hillsongers attempt to outwardly display the worldly benefits of the church to others, to show that ‘it works’ (Hillsong Conference, 2011, Session 39). This is seen to be a more effective form of evangelism than immediate proselytising and one that generates vast resources of loyalty among church members.

If, as Lazzarato (1996) notes, the slogan of post-Fordist capital is ‘become subjects!’., it is
clearly particular kinds of subjects that take a privileged place. Here, the production of loyal subjects is crucial, with loyalty being directed not merely toward the beliefs and practices embedded in the institution of Hillsong but to Hillsong as a brand. It may indeed be more accurate to speak of Hillsong as a ‘lovemark’, in the sense in which Kevin Roberts uses that term to describe the latest stage in the evolution of the brand and the capitalist production of ‘loyalty beyond reason’ (Foster, 2007: 8).

**Conclusion**

Religion today is largely less ascribed than was traditionally the case, as discourses on the ‘New Voluntarism’ (Roof, 1999) recognise. Megachurches must now compete in the secular sphere for the attention and loyalty of ‘consumers’, and consequently ‘you’d better make church compelling’ (Twitchell, 2004). The growth of the branded megachurch has made it clear that the mere promise of salvation has become a hackneyed product in today’s consumer society and purveyors and proselytisers of faith are increasingly aware that they must adapt to this changing context if they wish to survive. The particularly Hillsong ethic of ‘using what is in your hand’ to contribute to the cause is only the more tangible, material dimension of this overarching evangelical commitment to the ‘cause of the Kingdom’ (Houston, 2008a: 38). However, ideology alone cannot sustain such commitment. While the popular biographies of disaffected members (see Levin, 2007; Venn-Brown, 2007) would seem to indicate that false consciousness remains crucial to the survival of the spiritual and capitalist endeavours of Hillsong, we have argued that it is at the level of bodies, their vaguely felt potential, their compositional modulations and associated modes of subject-production that the Hillsong phenomenon needs to also be understood. As the literature on affective and immaterial labour reminds us, the relative intangibility of these operations of affect makes them no less real or powerful in their effects.

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**NOTES**

1. This has been a major preoccupation in journals such as EPA, EPD, Transactions, Cultural Geography and in diverse geographical journals in the last decade. For a review of some of the major issues here, see for example Thrift (2007), Bissell (2009), Dewsbury (2009), Hynes & Sharpe (2009), McCormack (2003) and Anderson (2006).

2. While Massumi’s work has been highly influential in this regard in geography, so too has the work of Hardt and Negri (2001) and Deleuze’s (1992) short essay on the ‘control society’.

3. For the reader curious about the scale of these rallies during conferences, one need only look to videos provided by the Hillsong church itself. See http://www.youtube.com/user/hillsongchurchsydney for highlights of the various conferences over the years, in particular the Annual Conference and the ‘Colour’ (Women’s) Conference.

4. See also the work of Connell and Gibson (2002) who suggest that popular music seeks to navigate what is both a source of tension and positive feedback mechanism between being a co-modified product and source of cultural meaning.

5. While this affective atmosphere shares superficial features with that of Southern US gospel services, it is markedly less spontaneous in appearance; Hillsong performances are meticulously stage managed with the aim of maximising seeker appeal in mind (see Mitchem, 2007).

6. We have retained the term ‘seeker’ in this paper in line with Hillsong’s own usage in order to emphasise the self-understanding of the Hillsong mission and its commitment to evangelism as its primary goal.

7. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the resonance of this language of comfort with the Howard government’s catch-phrase evocation of a ‘comfortable and relaxed’ nation. For a broad ranging discussion of the political linkages between Hillsong and the Howard government, see Warhurst (2007).


9. Simons (2007: 4) highlights the importance of the collective experience of enthusiasm, citing one Hillsonger who, during one of his first services, experience as an overwhelming pressure the need to raise his hand in unison with the congregation.

10. Though megachurches like Hillsong tend to be functionally non-denominational (Ellingson, 2010), the Hillsong church is a member of the Assemblies of God, a worldwide Pentecostal denomination that shares a common belief in the call espoused in ‘The Great Commission’ to teach others of Christianity in the hope of conversion, the raison d’être for all evangelical churches (Arias, 1991).

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