The modest coffee bean has become one of the most heavily exported agricultural commodities of our time (USDA, 2012) Shipped from the farthest stretches of the globe to its destination in amongst the high rises and smog. It is hard to move an inch these days without spotting a Starbucks or a costa coffee and these branding beacons have become global giants in today’s integrated economy. While yuppies bustle around London with ‘skinny latte’s’ and ‘venti frappachino’s’ on the morning agenda, far away in Kenya a coffee war has ensued with gangs ready to kill to get their hands on the prized export (Howden, 2012). Coffee trade offers a prominent example of how globalisation has impacted many areas of life and every time we drink a cup we make a political, moral and ethical decision.

Starbucks recently announced annual revenues of $3.2billion (BBC News, 2012), aside from weaving their accounts through tax loopholes they have achieved this by dominating the coffee market along with a few of its elite friends. Is Starbucks coffee really that good? Probably not. Baudrillard (1998) talks about consumption as 'magical' and it seems Starbucks have us spellbound. They have mastered the branding process so much so you would be pushed to find a single city slicker that would not recognise the crowned medusa that lives on our coffee cups. Just as Baudrillard (1998) says, we are mystified by commodities; we are buying the meanings of products. Starbucks coffee is not just a good coffee, it is a lifestyle, it aims to “conjure away the real with signs of the real” (Baudrillard, 1998 p33), hey look at me with my fashionable bourgeois coffee! Our brands give us status and Baudrillard does reduce the individual to nothing more than a consumer, finding meaning and happiness through objects rather than relationships saying, “the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects” (Baudrillard, 1998 p25). You might argue that only false happiness is found through consumption and perhaps Baudrillard would agree as he says that the happiness found through consumption is not lasting and this is what drives our need to consume bigger and better. The question we must ask is, can consumption be infinite? What comes after the 'Double Ristretto Venti Nonfat Organic Chocolate Brownie Frappuccino Extra Hot with Foam and Whipped Cream Upside Down Double Blended'? Can there really be more?

What does this need for consumption mean on a global scale? A global economy is nothing new but significant advances have brought together consumer societies like never before and some argue (Marsella, 2005) we are witnessing the emergence of a culturally homogenised society, and are moving worryingly towards a “global monoculture” (Marsella, 2005 p1). With Starbucks, along with many other major brands infiltrating pretty much every major city it becomes hard to identify our cultural differences. Marsella (2005) highlights too how it is not just the spread of our
designer labels and our fancy coffee but also has effects on our biological diversity.

The concept of western indoctrination is often viewed with an anti-capitalist eye. You might argue though that through modernisation eroding localisation we find not only common culture but common humanity (Smith, 2012). Such is the idea entertained by Marx and Engels, the withering away of the nation state and the unification of values under a global economy (Marsella, 2005). Although it seems this is playing out to be a somewhat idealistic view as we have seen the East reject western ideals in many cases.

Others have argued that localised cultures are not eroded and that many multinational companies make efforts to adapt products and meanings to the areas they invade. If we look at McDonalds for instance, they might provide a chorizo burger in Spain or a spicy lamb patty in Turkey, what is often referred to as glocalisation (Thompson & Zeynep, 2004). However you can argue that this still transforms existing environments resulting in hybridity, a post-modern monoculture.

There are arguments too to be made against Baudrillard's (1998) rather uncomfortable description of the individual commodity slave. When we take the coffee shop we can identify many attempts to resist the infection of corporate domination. Just recently in the town of Totne, townspeople successfully prevented Costa Coffee from opening up a branch there. This is a town which has managed to retain a localised economy, championing the sole trader and with great results (Hopkins, 2012). This town is a perfect example of how individuals cannot be merely reduced to consuming machines as especially now in the bust of the boom people are finding meaning through much more rewarding methods such as growing their own veg, volunteering and strengthening community ties.

So too there are market responses to the Starbucks takeover, small, local coffee shops offer the customer an oppositional environment. Contrary to popular belief, studies have shown that in some areas smaller coffee shops are performing surprisingly well in the wake of the Starbucks onslaught (Thompson & Zeynep, 2004). Providing a home from home feel with homemade baked goods, controversial political artwork or quirky drink names, this is a haven for those autonomous individuals who want to fight back against the 'evil giants'. However, you could argue that the, "anti-Starbucks atmosphere is no less calculated than a Starbuckified one" (Thompson & Zeynep, 2004 p638), after all those that run these establishments have the same end goal of profits. They use the signs and symbols of non-consumption but with the intention to compel you to consume. On this point you might ask do those that partake in this coffee counter-culture care if their moral distinctions are undermined in this process. Do we really need to know that our coffee is fair-trade or if we buy our coffee from some tattooed bohemian can we feel we have done our bit? A cynical view perhaps but one to consider, although it could be said that it is the very existence of those socially conscious citizens which has meant core and peripheral countries have had to adapt to more ethical business conduct, as globalisation has meant more public transparency (Clement & Defraneschi, 2006).

It is important to consider the implications of this growing market outside of the metropolis. Coffee trade has not been free from controversy, with the countries producing and exporting coffee usually from the poorer global south, issues surrounding work regulation, environmental costs and fair wages have not gone unnoticed. We can look at ideas put forward by Wallerstein to try to theorise why or how global capitalism has contributed to a world where the gap between the rich and poor is widening.

Wallerstein's World System Theory divides the world economy into three main groups, the core, semi-peripheral and peripheral (Bradshaw & Wallace, 1996). The core represents richer, highly industrialised countries such as Western Europe, USA and Japan. Those here can enjoy greater political power, high standards of living and economic stability. At the opposite end of the spectrum we find the highly dependent nations such as those in Africa and South America. His thesis says that historically and today core countries maintain a stronghold on the market by extraction and exploitation. They underpay the peripheral countries for their exports and overcharge them for their imports. This way the rich stay rich and it becomes almost impossible for peripheral nations to climb the economic ladder.
There are some flaws with this approach as we have seen integrated economies have supported growth for some countries such as Japan and South Korea, transforming them into modernised landscapes (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). Rostow argues too that it’s not this global division of labour which prevents peripheral countries from moving forward but it is their unwillingness to modernise (Cohen & Kennedy, 2000). He attributes their slow markets to things such as tradition and religion. Although there may be some argument for resistance to change having some part of the blame it would be hard to imagine huge multinational corporations being happy to share their slice of the pie if these nations did suddenly advance. He also fails to acknowledge the limitations for these countries, to play ball with the global players would mean huge cash injections for research and development, negotiations or refusal of key export resources creating political tensions and perhaps war to conquer and re-instate land and property rights. Not quite the easy trickle down picture Rostow explains.

If we apply Wallerstein’s theory to the coffee market we can see how the western oligopoly has forced down export prices making it difficult to provide workers with a decent wage. With peripheral countries competing so aggressively for foreign investment there is little regard for the environment, rainforest destruction being one of the main causes for concern with coffee production. Climate change (arguably the fault of western industrialised nations) has meant lower yields and corruption is also a problem for many of the peripherals, with little re-investment for their internal economy (Smith, 2010).

One of the biggest problems is lack of accountability; in a global market with different rules and laws in play it is easy for those to blame to become invisible. Companies do make efforts to influence positive change in this market but when Starbucks fair-trade coffee accounts for less than 1% of their coffee trade (Taylor, 2005) then it might feel to some that this is nothing more than a token gesture.

It is clear that although there is an argument that the global economy does provide an opportunity for individuals to develop and enrich their lives, for some the experience is something very different. We have entered an era of hyper consumption and the world shows no signs of slowing down. Even after a domino recession it seems the answer is another hefty dose of neo-liberal wealth chasing. Worryingly it seems the negative effects of a globalised society are no longer confined to the third world with places like Greece and Spain struggling to keep their heads above water. If our lives are built around consumption of things then what happens when we can no longer consume? But then again, everyone will always need their coffee... right?!
Bibliography:


Picture 1: 
http://www.sammyboy.com/showthread.php?49632-Have-you-had-your-coffee-this-morning

Picture 2: 
http://mhsaphuge1.wikispaces.com/Weber%27s+Model