The postmodern palate: dining out in the individualized era

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There exists a popular assumption that our taste, expressed through the clothes we wear, the music we listen to and of course the restaurants in which we dine, is reflective of our truly individual personalities. This chapter evaluates whether that is indeed the case. Are we free to construct our own self-identities that we display through our consumer behaviour, or alternatively, are we essentially the products of our social environments?

Postmodernism

The term postmodernism is now ubiquitous. It is commonly used within and beyond academic discourse and its scope of application seems almost limitless. Despite a recurring suggestion that the term is actually meaningless, that it is a false construct perpetuated by self-serving intellectuals, it does seem that commentary on postmodernism has helped

us to articulate the nature of contemporary cultural developments (Featherstone, 1991, p. 1).

The task of defining postmodernism as an identifiable social phenomenon is disrupted by the implication inherent within the prefix 'post'. As Featherstone notes:

> The problem with the term … [postmodernism] … revolves around the question of when does a term defined oppositionally to, and feeding off an established term start to signify something substantially different. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 7)

An understanding of the term can, it would seem, only come from being able to identify aspects of contemporary society that are discernibly different from that which went before, and from observing the processes of societal change.

The modern era is usually identified as the period during which mass industrialization occurred, as did supportive systems of national government and social infrastructure. At the heart of sociological commentary on the modern era has been an analysis of class-based social hierarchies and of their role in supporting industrial institutions. Indeed, as Beck notes (1992, p. 10), our acceptance of theories of modernity has resulted in us being accustomed to only consider social structures within the context of industrial structures. Sociological theories of modernity emphasize homogeneity and suggest that models of societal construction are universally applicable. In contrast, commentary on postmodernism rejects universally applicable propositions on the dynamics of contemporary society, on issues such as social class and power, and favours instead 'local narratives' (Calhoun et al., 2002, p. 414), which reveal the supposedly changing, unstructured nature of our present day life. However, this observation does not, in itself, display whether postmodernists have done more than comment upon forms of behaviour that are evident within the latter stages of the modern era, rather than having established a new and significantly different sociological theory.

In his seminal text, 'Risk Society – Towards a New Modernity', Beck (1992) observes the changing nature of late twentieth-century capitalist society. At the centre of his thesis is his claim that traditional social hierarchies, which were both reflective

of and supportive of divisions in the industrial labour market, are diminishing in importance. As he states:

> At that point [1950s] in time the unstable unity of shared life experiences mediated by the market and shaped by status, which Max Weber brought together in the concept of social class, began to break apart. Its different elements (such as material conditions dependent upon specific market opportunities, the effectiveness of tradition and of pre-capitalist lifestyles, the consciousness of communal bonds and of barriers to mobility, as well as networks of contact) have slowly disintegrated. (Beck, 1992, p. 96)

Beck's consideration of the consequences of this perceived change in the structure of society centres on the concept of *reflexive modernity* (1992) which, he suggests, requires us to develop our own biographies without the guiding influence of traditional class frameworks (termed *industrial modernity*). This process, known as *individualization*, encourages a belief that social legitimacy stems from personal achievement and the fulfilment of ambition, which in turn enhances the likelihood of individualized crises.

In addition, individualization diminishes the established characteristics and influence of social class groups, which normally had political roots. New political alliances have become issue based, rather than having a broad social class foundation. This results in temporary 'coalitions' (Beck, 1992, p. 100) of those with an interest in current campaigns and causes, often which are picked up and publicized by the media. The only permanent group conflicts, Beck (1992, p. 101) suggests, emerge from our '… ascribed characteristics … ', which are 'Race, skin color, gender, ethnicity, age, homosexuality, physical disabilities … ' Groups that are formed on the basis of such ascribed characteristics now seek to gain political influence through highlighting the incompatibility of group inequality with contemporary achievement orientation.

Zygmunt Bauman, one of the most prolific and distinguished commentators on postmodernism, who actually highlighted the supposed demise of the class-based system prior to Beck, dwells on the consequences of societal change for the individual. He reflects (2001) upon the extent to which individuals'

self-identities, throughout the modern era, were set by an unquestioned governing framework. It was, he suggests, the acceptance of such a framework, and its perpetuation through acceptance, which enabled us to attach meaning to our life choices. In addition, life meanings that we gained through forming connections with cultural phenomenon which were not ephemeral, but which were considered eternal, were not considered to be of equal value and so helped maintain social hierarchies. Bauman also highlights the view, often expressed by those that might be considered *mainstream* sociologists, that the constancy of the societal framework and the life meanings that it imposed, were maintained through the ideological hegemony of one social class. Readers will note that this view of the dynamics of society has been refined by Pierre Bourdieu (refer to Chapter 1).

Bauman's break with the mainstream, and the most obviously controversial element of his thesis, comes with his assertion that this view of the organization of society, and its resultant influence on life choices and self-identity formation, is now becoming redundant. In its place he sees emerging a society in which individuals' face insecurity and potential isolation as they are operating outwith the familiarity of reasoned conditions and boundaries. As he states:

> I propose that sociality, habitat, self-constitution and self-assembly should occupy in the sociological theory of post-modernity the central place that the orthodoxy of modern social theory reserved for the categories of society, normative group (like class or community), socialization and control. (Bauman, 2002, p. 432)

In Bauman's vision of society, the apparent deconstruction of established frameworks, which had the power to set behavioural norms, forces us to seek an alternative. This comes in the form of a range of relatively autonomous habitats, which we approach and accept or reject on a trial and error basis, which provide us with a 'self-assembly pattern'. Our freedom of access to different habitats, and therefore our ability to determine our self-assembly patterns is of course limited, and it is this that forms the basis of inequality in contemporary life. Our accumulation of appropriate 'symbolic tokens' (2002, p. 434), which provide access to

habitats and increase our range of realistic life choices, which in turn facilitate opportunities to develop our personal identities and social standing, is dependent upon our knowledge of the behavioural traits required within each habitat.

It should be clear that neither Beck nor Bauman are proposing that postmodernism signifies the emergence of a democratized society in which changes in the source of social status, and the consequential inequalities stemming from the cultural dominance of certain groups, have been overcome. Inequality is still evident, they suggest, but is increasingly based on factors other than social class.

Postmodern consumerism and self-identity

As Warde (1990) notes, patterns of consumption have not traditionally been a focus of attention for sociologists, unless in relation to manufacturing industry or social ills such as addiction or famine. However, much sociological enquiry does now centre on the extent to which the apparent disintegration of socio-economic class divisions and our resultant membership of alternative cultural habitats are linked with our consumer behaviour. In essence, are our self-identities now formed and displayed less through our occupations and positions in the class hierarchy, and more through our understanding and acceptance of the symbolic value of goods and services?

A useful starting point for this element of the discussion is to note the apparent changing status of the consumer. There now seems to be widespread acceptance that in the developed world we are living in 'consumer societies', whether or not this is a term that is commonly understood. Reflective of this is that the word 'consumer' no longer applies only to those buying products from retail outlets, but also to:

> Museum visitors, theatre audiences, sports spectators and T.V. viewers; university students, social workers' clients and even taxpayers and the public served by the police. (Abercrombie et al., 1994, p. 1)

What is implied by the scope of application of the term is that those providing any form of service, whether in the commercial or public sectors, should adopt an explicit 'customer orientation'. This could be taken to signify that the status of the

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consumer, or as Abercrombie et al. (1994) suggest the 'authority' of the consumer, has grown.

In his review of the literature on theories of postmodern consumer culture, Featherstone (1991) identifies complementary themes: the growing significance of the symbolic value of goods and services; the aestheticization of everyday life; and the emergence of 'lifestyle culture'.

In relation to the first of these themes, the rapid expansion in the scale of capitalist production, which has occurred since the 1950s, has resulted in consumption becoming a key element of leisure activity. This might signify the dawning of an egalitarian, democratized culture, or, through the eyes of the more cynical observer, it may stem from mass manipulation of consumers by sophisticated capitalist organizations. Of course these two alternative views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Featherstone (1991) examines the consequences of the growth in the scale of consumer activity, including whether it signifies some deeper change in the structure and organization of society. He draws on the work of Baudrillard, who has used semiotic analysis in an attempt to comprehend the symbolic meaning of modern commodities and consumer experiences. In line with postmodernist thought, in Baudrillard's latter works (Poster, 2001), he proposes that metannarratives, which suggest a structure to society that places us in continuously evolving historical contexts, are no longer relevant. Instead, he holds that we are operating in a 'virtual' or 'hyper-real' (Poster, 2001) world in which our sense of reality is derived from media-generated images. The images (or signs) emanating from and associated with commodities, most often generated by advertisers, provide our operating context. As Baudrillard states:

> Advertising […] is mass society, which, with the aid of an arbitrary and systematic sign, induces receptivity, mobilizes consciousness, and reconstitutes itself in the very process as the collective. (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 13)

It is our 'receptivity' to the profusion and presentation of commodities and images that stimulates desire:

> Streets with overcrowded and glittering store windows, the displays of delicacies, and all the scenes of alimentary

and vestimentary festivity, stimulate a magical salivation. (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 33)

At the core of the second theme identified by Featherstone (1991) is a suggestion that in postmodern society our tastes, preferences and consumer choices are now, more than ever before, influenced by aesthetic considerations. Featherstone (1991) tracks the manner in which everyday life has become increasingly aestheticized. The foundations of this trend were laid by the urban flaneurs of the mid-nineteenth century who sought, through their personal conduct, to turn their lives into works of art. In the UK this approach was exemplified in the life of Oscar Wilde, who '… we remember … as much for what he was as for what he wrote … ' (Eagleton, 1991, p. vii). It might be safe to assume that the words of Lord Illingworth, a character in Wilde's play *A Woman of no Importance*, were reflective of Wilde's personal ambitions:

> A man who can dominate a London dinner table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule. (Russell, 1989, p. 62)

Later, in the 1960s, the aestheticization of everyday life was further propelled by the emergence of pop art, the greatest proponent of which was Andy Warhol. His success in challenging established notions of what constitutes art, partly through creating works that centred on unremarkable and accessible consumer goods, such as tins of Campbell's soup, and on icons of popular culture, such as Marilyn Monroe, encouraged the masses to indulge in aesthetic judgement, a pastime that was previously the preserve of the cultural elite. This can be seen as part of a wider trend that undermined the authority of those who previously had the exclusive right to determine what was, and was not, of cultural significance. For some this was interpreted as a depressing descent towards the granting of credibility to popular culture. For others, such as Angela Robbie, it was:

> … the coming into being of those whose voices were historically drowned out by the (modernist) metanarratives of mastery, which were in turn both patriarchal and imperialist (1994, p. 23, cited in Storey, 1999, p. 133) which

> … has enfranchised a new body of intellectuals, voices from margins speaking from positions of difference: ethnic, gender, class, sexual preference … (Storey, 1999, p. 133)

Such trends, in addition to the evident blurring of the distinction between art and design, is leading to widespread '… aesthetic consumption and the need [for the individual] to form life into an aesthetically pleasing whole … ' (Featherstone, 1991, p. 67). This may add weight to Baudrillard's (2001) proposal that we are operating in a hyper-real world and also, as is commonly suggested, that as our contemporary preoccupation with aesthetics is fuelled by media output then it is based on little more than ephemeral values, the consequence of which is that our cultural markers do not relate to history or tradition, and our lives lack depth.

The challenge that comes to us all, in a world in which we are faced with a profusion of images and a vast array of consumer choices, the implications of which can be symbolically and emotionally significant, is to steer a path that enables us to create appealing lifestyles. Lifestyle, based on consumer preferences, is the primary means by which we communicate to others the nature of our desired self-perception. As Featherstone notes:

> The modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, decoration, car and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 86)

This might imply that individuals have absolute freedom to pursue personal pleasures, and indeed Featherstone accepts that the desire to develop a lifestyle is not the preserve of members of only particular groups, but is a possibility for many, regardless of age or sex. However, he does suggest that similar lifestyles are evident within class fractions, rather than the widespread desire for lifestyle acquisition signifying that we are entering a more egalitarian age. In essence, he proposes that we are all more lifestyle conscious, yet our lifestyle construction is still greatly influenced by traditional social frameworks. Clearly this challenges key aspects of the postmodernist case.

By whatever means consumer behaviour may be influenced it is certainly the case that we make judgements about others based on our analysis of lifestyles. As Storey notes (1999), when we meet someone new, our understanding of their character comes from observations about their lifestyle, which in turn comes from questioning them about their patterns of consumption:

> On knowing the answer to enough of these questions [relating to their consumer behaviour], we feel able to construct a cultural and social pattern and thus to begin to locate the person in a particular cultural and social space – we begin, in other words, to think we know who they are. (Storey, 1999, p. 128)

Despite the importance that is placed on the act of consumption, in particular on its ability to reveal aspects of personal character, there is no suggestion from Storey that our consumption patterns actually:

> … determine our social being; but it does mean that what we consume provides us with a script with which we can stage and perform in a variety of ways, the drama of who we are. (Storey, 1999, p. 136)

For Storey, like so many others, our social being, which as he suggests is reflected in our cultural consumption, is greatly influenced by traditional forms of social stratification.

For Bauman too, consumption is a reflection of self, but as was noted earlier in this chapter he is one of relatively few sociologists who suggests that traditional social hierarchies do not now greatly influence the construction of self. He proposes that despite not having total authority, the postmodern consumer has drawn power away from the cultural and professional elites which previously controlled access to certain service environments and cultural experiences. It is the absence of normative cultural frameworks and the inevitable control which they exercised, which casts us adrift and provides us with the freedom to develop self-identities through consumption (Warde, 1994). What we are witnessing, Bauman suggests (2002, p. xv) is a new requirement for self-determination rather than experiencing socially constructed determination. An important aspect of this personal quest for

identity formation, as a consequence of individualization, is that it is an ongoing process or journey. As Bauman states:

> … individualization consists in transforming human identity from a given into a task – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the conse-quences (also the side effects of their performance). (Bauman, 2002, p. xv)

Or, as Storey succinctly puts it: identity formation is less about 'roots' and more about 'routes' (1999, p. 135). The continu-ous nature of the process of identity formation means that individuals who are 'disembedded' can have no destination in which they become 'reembedded' (Bauman, 2002, p. xvi) and where they might find contentment and satisfaction. In add-ition, the independent nature of the journey is fraught with risk as personal success, as well as failure, is self-generated. If we accept this element of Bauman's argument then we might con-clude that despite the emancipation and personal empower-ment which individualization can bring, so too it brings its own pressures to bare. A pessimistic interpretation of the con-sequences of individualization might also suggest that it breeds widespread indifference to others and undermines any sense of wider community.

Bauman examines the relationship between consumption, identity formation and changing social structures in some detail. He accepts that access to the market is limited and in this respect he distinguishes between the *seduced* and the *repressed* (Warde, 1994). The seduced are those who indulge in consumption and whose primary motive for doing so is the formation of self-identity. Individual freedom of choice char-acterizes the existence of the seduced. They are not restricted by socialization, nor do they suffer from intrusive state regula-tion. There is a risk, however, that the seduced may experience anxiety and even a sense of isolation resulting from the indi-vidual rather than collective nature of their responsibility for making consumer choices. However, any anxiety may be assuaged, Bauman suggests (Warde, 1994), through reliance on expert advice, most probably from the advertising indus-try. In contrast, the repressed are those whose freedom is lim-ited both by poverty and state control. The repressed do not

operate in the free market but rather are dependent upon the state for the provision of benefits and services.

Warde (1994) does highlight what he feels are significant weaknesses within Bauman's case. These can be summarized as follows:

- While Bauman does propose that there exists harmless competition between consumers over the acquisition of self-identities (harmless because competition is not reflective of unappealing societal divisions), this underplays the extent to which consumption can be driven for a desire for perceived social and cultural supremacy, often through displays of conspicuous consumption (Warde, 1997).

- Although there is no doubt that identity formation is an important consideration within consumer choices, it is wrong to dismiss consumers' consideration of price, value for money and use-value. Warde (1997) points to the work of the Consumers' Association in the UK, which acts on behalf of around one million members who require information about products and services, including the results of performance tests, which they use to make rational purchase decisions.

- Bauman's rigid categorization of the seduced and the repressed is somewhat simplistic as in reality what exists is a continuum at one end of which are the wealthy and at the other end the poor. An identifiable dividing point on this continuum, in the manner in which Bauman implies, would be impossible to locate. In addition, Bauman exaggerates the extent to which the State and the market represent opposing forces of control and freedom respectively. For example, State regulation plays an important role in the smooth operation of the market, and the State does not deliberately seek to undermine the repressed, which it is likely to view as '… expensive and embarrassing …' (Warde, 1994, p. 60).

- The power of socialization as an influence on consumer choice is greatly underplayed. Bauman's vision of individuals operating in relative isolation, outwith well-established social networks, does not reflect common experience. Warde suggests that in addition to searching for self-identity,

'Rather more often, being socially acceptable is the goal and the means of allaying anxiety' (1994, p. 65).

Proposals from some, based on observations of consumer behaviour, incorporate an acceptance of the disintegration of rigid class hierarchies with a suggestion that new social ties are emerging. *Informalization* is characterized by a lack of conformity not only to traditional patterns of consumption but also to those that might, in a postmodern environment, be interpreted as bestowing cultural value. 'Free rein is thus given to personal preference as moral, aesthetic and social standards are relaxed, so behaviour becomes irregular … ' (Warde, 1997, p. 13). Informalization is identified as leading to a counter tendency to individualization as those who lack association with others seek to develop new communities, a sense of belonging and connection with less transient cultural markers (*communification*). A form of communification that has consumption at its core is *stylization*.

Deindividualized stylization

So far in this chapter class-based social construction has been identified as the only credible alternative to the view, as expressed by Bauman, Beck and others, that society is now witnessing a process of individualization. However, while accepting the proposal that traditional hierarchies are becoming redundant, other postmodernists are not wedded to the concept of individualization. For example, Maffesoli (1996) starts from the premise that traditional social construction, linked to political ideologies, is being challenged. He suggests that it is appropriate to draw conclusions only after examining the nature of people's life experiences, rather than to make assumptions about life experiences based on beliefs about class hierarchies. He seems frustrated by the apparently common rejection of any view of society as being heterogeneous. However, rather than accepting individualization as a dominant trend he proposes that a process of deindividualization is resulting in the emergence of new forms of social group, or 'tribe'. Maffesoli (1996) suggests that we too readily accept and rely on the concept of individualization, as is evident in academic and

journalistic commentary, and that we promote it as the cause of a supposed decline in collectivism and a growth in levels of selfishness. He presents such an approach as lazily conventional and suggests that it masks the nature of contemporary social ties. As he states:

> We have dwelled so often on the dehumanization and the disenchantment with the modern world and the solitude it induces that we are no longer capable of seeing the networks of solidarity that exist within. (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 72)

Rather than our identities being self-contained, Maffesoli suggests that the reality of our existence comes from social interaction. He examines the extent to which such interaction results in the formation of tribes and the influence of interaction within tribes. In essence, he believes that we become members of various tribes, each of which might relate to some aspect of our lives (e.g. youth culture, hobbies and musical preferences), and within which we accept and contribute to the evolution of shared values, attitudes and tastes. It is the fluidity (multiple membership and movement between tribes) and its consequences, which might incorrectly be taken to signify ongoing individualization, rather than complex socialization. In Maffesoli's opinion, a crucial element of this system of tribes is that public expressions of membership, through the adoption of conspicuous lifestyles, are becoming increasingly common.

The term stylization (Warde, 1997) describes an apparent growing preoccupation with style consciousness as a central aspect of lifestyle, and it is suggested by some (e.g. Maffesoli, 1996) that the development of lifestyle is increasingly becoming an end in itself. Within style groups a system of codes exist which are used to maintain exclusivity and set criteria for membership. There is a risk that in developing a commentary on rising levels of style-consciousness, and its expression through consumption, we might lose track of the question of influence. Are members of style groups bound by pursuit of a lifestyle for reasons unrelated to class-based political ideologies? There is a suggestion that a tendency towards style consciousness is more evident within certain socially marginal communities, the members of which possibly feel isolated from wider society. Empirical work undertaken by Haslop et al. (1998) suggests

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that members of a particular gay community (those frequenting bars and nightclubs in Manchester's 'gay village') are not bound by modernist conventions. As they state:

> From a postmodernist marketing perspective, the 'gay market' is of considerable interest, as it is not organically based on a particular location of historical community, but is a portmanteau term for people from all walks of life who share a form of sexual identity, which they choose to make visible to varying degrees, depending on preference, mood and external conditions. (Haslop et al., 1998, p. 319)

Haslop et al. go on to examine the role that common style traits play within this community. They note that the 'double burden of stigma and invisibility' (1998, p. 319) has encouraged many to adopt shared patterns of consumption, expressed through style, that act as a form of communication; communication of group membership, of distinction from wider society, and of acceptance of particular values. It is suggested that a semiotic code is established, primarily based on aspects of lifestyle, which facilitates an unspoken understanding between group members and which provides a welcome sense of security. It is claimed that a crucial element of consumption for this community centres on the shared social spaces in which adopted lifestyles are acted out, most commonly pubs and nightclubs. They are not simply centres of consumption. They influence those who attend through a process of cultural socialization and therefore become the forum in which to learn the cultural norms of the community and through which to secure membership.

Lugosi and Peackock (2000) highlight another specific social group for whom norms of social consumption have become established which, in turn, influence aspects of lifestyle for individual members. They studied behaviour evident within particular clubs that serve, almost exclusively, those involved in London's West-end theatre productions. They witnessed wildly hedonistic yet stylized behaviour, the like of which would be considered unacceptable in many circles, but which in these environments was positively encouraged. They conclude that distinctive, stylized behaviour of those from this artistic community is used to signify membership, perpetuate distinction and provide a form of comfort and security.

In both these examples, there is a suggestion that the emphasis on style in patterns of consumption actually has a democratizing effect. It can conceal divisions that may once have been at the fore, such as those based on class, by imposing a new range of cultural conventions. These conventions rest upon an understanding and display of style.

It is worth considering whether democratization of this sort extends beyond those within specific minority groups. Mort (1996) comments on the extent to which the rising importance of lifestyle in the UK was directly linked to the tax cutting policies of the Thatcher government during the 1980s. He notes that there was a widespread perception among the government's opponents that tax cuts, which fuelled excessive consumption, were responsible for the emergence of shallow and transient value systems within which the role of lifestyle became central. As he states:

> the government has spawned a 'candy floss society' in which consumer spending had been allowed to run riot. The worship of money [and the] uncontrollable demand for goods, was forging a new civilization of banality. (Mort, 1996, p. 2)

In addition, and with echoes of some postmodern commentary, Mort claims that the government explicitly promoted the view that the growth in consumerism brought freedom from the shackles of the class-bound society.

> The rhetoric of the marketplace, which equated the freedom to spend money with broader political and cultural freedoms, was identified as a key part of this political vocabulary. (Mort, 1996, p. 5)

However, despite the claims of the political masters of the time, it is difficult to find empirical evidence that supports the view that consumerism, and its expression through lifestyle, brings emancipation. The growth in both style conscientiousness and political apathy do not in themselves suggest freedom from class boundaries.

Dining out

At this stage in the chapter readers could be forgiven for questioning how this commentary relates to culinary taste and

consumer behaviour in the restaurant sector. Well, there can be few types of venue in which the style conscious come out to play quite so conspicuously as in restaurants. Evidence suggests that commercial hospitality spaces, including restaurants, are important centres for the display of lifestyles and for learning lifestyle conventions. It could be argued that restaurants, and the consumer behaviour which they help to sustain, are symbols of our shift to a postmodern society in which the pursuit of lifestyle is a widespread preoccupation.

Urry (1995) argues that the social role of space, and in this instance we will obviously apply our observations to the social roles of restaurants, is an issue on which there has been little serious commentary. This, he feels, is a significant omission as evidence suggests that changes in the use of space in recent years are reflective of the economic restructuring which characterizes postmodernism. Urry makes some specific observations about the changing use of space and its link with postmodernism. Firstly, as was noted earlier in this chapter, there has been an apparent growth in aesthetic culture in which visual considerations are key. Urry suggests that architecture and interior design are now less representative of cultural hegemony and moral authority and more driven by a desire to reflect and/or influence popular aesthetic appeal. Also, our preoccupation with aesthetic considerations becomes self-perpetuating as it puts more competitive pressure on the owners and operators of public spaces to make them as physically appealing as possible to customers and other stakeholders. In addition, Urry claims that our perception of the purpose of postmodern public spaces is that not only should they be aesthetically stimulating, but also that they should facilitate consumption. As he notes, the use of many spaces, especially in our cities, has changed from being production based to consumption based.

Secondly, the growth in our symbolic culture, which is largely perpetuated by the media, encourages the use of space as a forum for the development and expression of lifestyle and self-identity. Indeed as Urry suggests:

> … it is possible for localities to consume one's identity so that such places become almost literally all-consuming places. (Urry, 1995, p. 2)

Finkelstein (1989) in her text Dining Out: a sociology of modern manners, which is still one of the most fluent examinations of the social purpose of restaurants, discusses the role of the individual within the social context. As she states:

> … it is the convergence of the private with the public and social which designates the restaurant as an appropriate setting for a sociological analysis of contemporary habits of everyday life. (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 3)

At the heart of her argument is her belief that the restaurant is an 'architect of desire' (1989, p. 3). By this she means that the restaurant is responsible for the manufacture of expectations of particular pleasurable emotional experiences. This it does through the display of stylized and fashionable environments, the symbolic value of which is understood and valued by potential customers. In essence, she suggests that emotions have become comodified as the restaurant itself prescribes them.

Finkelstein suggests that the nature of control over social interaction between restaurant customers results in 'uncivilized sociality'. While customers might believe that restaurant dining provides the ideal opportunity for expressions of individuality, certainly within the realms of culinary taste, they are in fact adhering to stylized conventions.

Urry (1995) suggests that our understanding of stylized conventions, and their appropriateness for particular public settings (which could include restaurants) comes from a process of cultural socialization, which is often fuelled by media output. In this respect, it is worth commenting briefly on the nature of media coverage of restaurant dining and matters of culinary taste. As Randall (2000) notes, in the UK there has been a significant growth in recent years in media interest in culinary taste and dining. Randall notes that in postmodern society it is to a large extent mediated messages, from a range of genres, which influence our perceptions of food and drink related issues. She uses semiotic analysis to interpret meanings presented through media output. To an extent Randall's conclusions suggest that the current popularity of food and dining related media has as much to do with the acquisition of admired and valued lifestyles as it does with a genuine interest in cuisine. Randall highlights a number of techniques which

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are used by the media to form influential relationships with audiences. These include celebrity chefs adopting informal styles of communication to promote a sense of intimacy with audience members. This in turn legitimizes the lifestyle which the chefs are seen to represent, of which restaurant dining and displays of good taste are important elements. Secondly, the desirability of association with the lifestyles that are supposedly adopted by celebrity chefs is further encouraged by their celebrity status. Finally, Randall notes that a significant proportion of media output, which is ostensively food and drink related, actually dwells on other issues, often related to lifestyle. For example, the popular restaurant critic A.A. Gill, of the Sunday Times newspaper, is well known for commenting upon a range of issues, such as his own lifestyle and tastes, before he begins to offer criticism of the food which he is served. This example of his work, relating to an Oxford-based restaurant that has since closed, displays how he uses rather contentious humour to maintain the interest of his readers:

> Let's start with the room. It appears to have been designed by a committee from the Women's Institute who couldn't agree on a theme ….The whole edifice screams of provincial cul-de-sac showing off, and the sort of Buddha-like suburban self-satisfaction that makes us city boys snort with patronizing derision. (Sunday Times, 05/08/01)

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine the concept of postmodernism and to consider its influence on culinary taste and associated consumer behaviour, particularly as expressed within the international restaurant sector. The main tenet of postmodernism is that traditional, class-based social structures, which had the power to influence social conventions, are being deconstructed. Two alternative propositions have been discussed. Firstly, that the emergence of postmodern society has resulted in individuals being free to construct their own self-identities through consumption. Secondly, that the decline of traditional social structures forces us to adopt alternative forms of social interaction and security, primarily though the adoption of lifestyles. Evidence from the restaurant

sector seems to suggest that culinary taste, and associated consumer behaviour, could be considered important aspects of lifestyle. Restaurants provide environments in which to learn stylized forms of behaviour, and in which to seek membership of stylized groups. In addition, media output reinforces the lifestyle enhancing opportunities that restaurants provide. Culinary taste, it would seem, is not an expression of individual preference, but a signifier of longing for social acceptance.

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