

# *Sedition*

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This paper is about Sedition, a barbershop located in Darlinghurst, Sydney. As well as operating as a barber, owner Michael Joyce is an artist and uses his shop as a studio. Joyce lets members of the local arts community use the space to exhibit work, conduct interviews, play music, dance and put on performances, generally free of charge.

The site is critically analysed through the lenses of modernity and postmodernity and when considered simultaneously the contrasting frames of reference serve to enhance our understanding of Sedition. Sedition can be seen as a microcosm for the present moment: both goal-oriented and irrational. Whilst seemingly incongruous or oppositional, understanding and appreciating the validity of both ideas of modernity and postmodernity in relation to the site allows us to understand not only the site itself but, by extension, the present moment.

Sedition can be broken down into two parts: Sedition the business, which details the barbershop aspect of the venue, and Sedition the cultural hub, an after-hours venue with no regard for clear direction or for turning a profit. Examined separately, the two sides correspond to metanarratives of modernity and the questioning of those same metanarratives respectively, as outlined by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1997).

Examining business and hub side-by-side, whilst seemingly confusing, increases our understanding of the dichotomous nature of the site and serves to provide us with a means of understanding not only the site but the present moment in which we live, characterised by an unprecedented use of technology.

Sedition is a barbershop located on 275 Darlinghurst Road, Darlinghurst, in the city of Sydney. Sedition might seem to shine as a beacon of modernist idealism but, in fact, it has a wildly postmodern underbelly. Michael Joyce, the owner and self-employed barber at Sedition, is also an artist. Joyce uses the space as an atelier, creating conceptual and pop art at quieter times during his working day. After hours, lopped tresses are swept up and the floor is cleared for interviews, art exhibitions, avant-garde experimental music, contact dance, performance art and beat poetry. The business space readily transforms into a cultural hub where typically free, unrestricted and undirected creative endeavours take over and creativity for creativity's sake replaces any overarching purpose that might have existed during official opening hours.

The discourses of modernity and postmodernity are both relevant in an analysis of Sedition. Postmodernity stands as an extension and largely a rejection of modernity, yet I believe the two are complementary theories. We live in an ever-increasing age of contradiction and piecemeal fragmentation. Front-page newspaper articles condemn graffiti while the attached lifestyle liftout in the same publication validates 'aerosol art'; one might define themselves not as left or right wing but socially left and economically right. George Orwell coined the term "Doublethink" in his dystopic novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). Orwell wrote, "Doublethink is basically the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them." (Orwell, 1949, Part II, Chapter IX) That isn't quite the full

definition but for my purposes it is not only plausible to accept Doublethink in this form; it's highly practical.

Throughout this essay I will refer to Sediton in two forms: Sediton the business, when describing the regular role of the shop, and Sediton the cultural hub, denoting its alternative and after-hours use.

Sediton is representative of the present moment, a microcosm of the world around us – Sediton the barbershop demonstrates the rational while Sediton the cultural hub demonstrates the irrational, and the fact that the two halves are actually one whole show the way in which the rational and the irrational, the business and the cultural hub, the postmodern and modern, work in harmony. By understanding and accepting modernist and postmodernist ideas in relation to Sediton, we can better understand not only the dichotomous nature of the venue itself but by extension, the present moment in which we live. Frames of reference are important in considering not only Sediton but also contemporary society. A customer who knows Sediton only as a barber would have a completely different understanding of the shop to an attendee of a contact dance performance arriving and leaving at night. We can't possibly experience every given scenario possible in the spectrum of human experience but empathy and being able to assume the experiences of others are important in understanding not just Sediton but the world in which we live, the present moment. As such, considering aspects of modernity and postmodernity together is fundamental in understanding Sediton and, therefore, the present moment. One such aspect of the present moment such plurality of thought helps to grasp is new mediums of communication and business that have arisen out of new technology.

Burrell and Cooper (1988) said that modernism is largely based on abstract concepts such as "progress". Modernity upholds various metanarratives, including rationalism, liberalism – especially economic liberalism, empiricism and, of course, progress and growth. Though the following is a long quote, it is particularly apt – Stokes argues,

"in characterizing this period as modern, one generally understands it to be characterized by the growth of capitalist industrial economies... the rise of liberal democracy. Central to modernity... are assumptions of historical progress and greater certainty in scientific and philosophical knowledge based upon instrumental forms of rationality." (Stokes, 1997, p24)

Postmodernity, however, challenges all aspects of modernity. Lyotard wrote, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives," (Lyotard, 1997, p36) and Sediton's cultural side is a prime example of such a definition. But just as the Dadaist art movement failed as a movement without definition – for to label oneself as indefinable is a definition in itself – Habermas (1981) and Callinicos (1991) argue that Lyotard's definition of the postmodern is self-refuting: one could argue that the rejection of metanarratives is the metanarrative of postmodernity. I agree, and so to legitimise and work with Lyotard's definition I will add to it: simply put, postmodernity has at its core incredulity towards modernist metanarratives.

Sedition, first and foremost, is a business. Joyce rents the shop space, earns a living and turns a profit so he can keep his business running. He pays tax on his earnings, which ostensibly contribute to a growing and forward-moving Australia. In this sense Sedition is very much a vessel of modernity, a cog in the machine of economic liberalism – Joyce has no obligation to anyone but himself to maintain his business and, customers willing, can earn, charge or waste as much money as he likes. In brief, the modernist view of Sedition deals with what Lyotard called “some grand narrative such as... the creation of wealth.” (Lyotard, 1997) Even though Lyotard’s writings are chiefly on postmodernism, here it makes sense to consider the postmodernist’s view of modernity because his ideas of postmodernism are based on his own understanding of modernity. It isn’t just Lyotard who labels the creation of wealth as a fundamentally modernist idea.

Adam Smith’s “Invisible Hand” theory (1759) describes the way in which people and businesses naturally fill gaps and opportunities in a capitalist society because they are opportunities to further increase one’s relative wealth. Smith also wrote of the importance of free trade and business contracts in *The Wealth Of Nations* (1776) and was one of the first western modernist economists. According to the “Invisible Hand” theory, Joyce would have seen an opportunity in Darlinghurst to make a living as a barber and opened his shop – the gap in the market dictated his purpose, it was the invisible hand that pushed him in that direction. Taking the Invisible Hand theory as a starting point and combining it with the modernist metanarrative of growth, a mining company, a government or any business that finds a way of making a greater profit than what they are currently making will take advantage of such a situation. Sedition, therefore, can be seen as representative of any business the world over, on a small or large scale. As you can see, a grasp of modernity allows us to understand Sedition and by extension, the present moment.

The notion that making more money is a marker of success is a modernist idea. Marx, who argued for the redistribution of wealth and predicted an uprising of a disenchanted working class (Marx, Engels, 1848, p5), would disagree with this notion fundamental to modernist thinking. Whether or not you agree with Marx or with Smith, who in this case would vehemently defend the right of the individual to increase their wealth (Smith, 1776, p1-15), is irrelevant. What is important is being able to acknowledge that whilst you might only agree with or support one point of view, both are, essentially, equally valid. Thus, a simultaneous understanding of modernity and postmodernity not only helps to understand Sedition as a business but as a cultural hub.

All things considered, running the moneymaking business is not Joyce’s only purpose at Sedition.

As the last customer leaves and Joyce hangs the chairs on the wall and sweeps up the hair on the floor, the three by eight metre shop transforms from modernist to postmodern. There is no specific purpose, direction or target outcome, no set opening or closing hour. Robyn Wilson directed the Left Coast Festival at Sedition, which involved several after hours events per week over two months. She mentioned that full shows weren’t a priority. At an improvised dance performance in May 2010 she said, “even if there isn’t a ‘good’ turnout, being able to interact with the space as part of the audience can be a great experience.”

In reality Seditio exists both as a modernist freight train of economic liberalism and of progress, but also as a whimsical, postmodernist middle finger stuck out of the lone window of a corrugated iron shed to the passing bullet train of modernity. Seditio does and simultaneously does not conform to Smith's "Invisible Hand" theory. While the business operates within the Modernist grand narrative of economic progress and has successfully rooted itself as a profit-running cog, Seditio the cultural hub does not fit into the same framework. Darlinghurst is riddled with studios and gallery spaces and it is neither logical nor economically viable for the cultural hub to exist as a modernist endeavour. Much more fitting is Michael Featherstone's idea of postmodernity:

"Amongst the central features associated with postmodernism... are the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life... a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface "depthlessness" of culture." (Featherstone, 1988, p195-215)

In this sense, Seditio's pastiche of artistic pursuits is an example of postmodernity and demonstrates the way postmodernity holds no regard for modernity, in this case the metanarratives of progress and economic rationalism. It must be mentioned, however, that Joyce's art is available for sale to the public. Even while largely rejecting modernist metanarratives, capitalism and modernity are so ingrained in the contemporary society that progress is still very much a part of the cultural hub and for the most part unavoidable. So how does an exploration of postmodernity at Seditio, the cultural hub, help us understand the venue? Seditio after hours is the polar opposite of the daytime business. Logic and reason is swapped for the irrational, it exists because it can, and that is reason enough. In one sense Seditio the cultural hub can be understood in the same way postmodernity sprung out of modernity or Romanticism out of scientific rationalism - as a reaction. Joyce, perhaps not happy with existing solely as a member of the workforce, reacted. In this sense Seditio the cultural hub lends itself to a Marxist reading.

In his Communist Manifesto, Marx, though in a more negative fashion than Smith, links modernity with the quest for wealth:

"Modern Industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist." (Marx, 1848, p4)

Here Marx blames modernity for turning small business into large-scale production. Perhaps Joyce empathises with Marx and through his profitless, postmodern endeavours seeks to subvert the efficient though arguably - certainly, according to Marx - dehumanising large-scale production of goods. Because Seditio can be seen as a microcosm of the present moment, perhaps seemingly pointless postmodernist activities such as flash mobbing could be seen as the proletariat expressing discontent at their social standing and role as a spoke in the wheel of capitalism.

At the same time, however, I would that argue that Seditio doesn't need to justify why it operates its creative space, suffice to say that it is done out of enjoyment, like throwing oneself out of a perfectly stable aeroplane with a parachute or attempting to drive a motorcar hundreds of times around the same loop of road faster than anyone else. More to the point, postmodernity, through its rejection of modernist metanarratives, validates seemingly unjustifiable decisions. In the case of Seditio that means putting time and energy into projects that will not return a profit, something that subverts the economic system western society operates within and fundamental ideas of modernity such as Hobsbawm's claim of a "material concept of history." (Hobsbawm, 1998, p42). Seditio is a microcosm of the world and as such, the same principle ideas that explain the way in which barber and artist Joyce chooses to use his space are relevant to the present moment. As well as satisfying their own monetary and material needs and desires through work they may not enjoy, most humans devote time and energy to events, activities and projects without direct measurable return, wherever they are in the world.

Both sides of Seditio can be justified with their respective frameworks of modernity and postmodernity, but considering them simultaneously is key in allowing us to fully understand the site. A greater depth of knowledge is achieved when considering more than one point of view. Even when the observer has already made up his or her mind, the ability to empathise, to put oneself in another's shoes, will broaden their understanding of whatever it is they are observing. Postmodernity and modernity offer contrasting viewpoints across a spectrum of similar ideas, including those of growth, development and the treatment of grand narratives. Whilst modernity offers a more traditional and widely accepted viewpoint, postmodernity seeks to challenge the basis of these ideas and questions how we come to validate metanarratives. According to Lyotard, "modern" is the term given "to designate any science that legitimates itself with this kind [self-legitimation] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative."(Lyotard, 1997, p36)

You don't need to submit to Big Brother but after getting one's head around Orwell's Doublethink, accepting the fact that modernity explains why Seditio exists primarily to turn a profit and provide Michael Joyce with a livelihood, and simultaneously exists primarily to support art initiatives in Darlinghurst we can better understand its place in today's society. For the patron getting their hair cut once a month Seditio is a shop first and foremost and a place of play second. For the artist, the dancer, the poet, Seditio is their hub, their weekly hangout, and their perception may be that Joyce happens to cut hair between sculpting art in the daytime. One's understanding of place is largely based on experience, and so, as I have stressed, being able to empathise and step outside of one's own frame of reference is essential in appreciating the role of Seditio. Such empathy is also necessary to appreciate the present moment, now more than ever.

As a result of an unprecedented access to technology there are an increasing numbers of mediums in which we can experience the world, whether creatively, scientifically, economically or otherwise. The advent of the mobile phone, Skype, the blogosphere and social media websites like Twitter and Facebook sit alongside traditional media; television, radio and print media. Digital technology, and largely the Internet, has made new avenues for experience, whether online shopping or 140 character Tweets. They have become a part of everyday life and being able to acknowledge the

importance and significance of each is just one way ideas of modernist and postmodernist perspectives can be translated to help in understanding how and why certain media forms might be appreciated more or less by certain people but ultimately how they are all valid. To the modernist they may show progress, to the traditionalist they are inferior and to the postmodernist they a new means of subversion. Regardless of those views, in the scheme of the present moment, it is important to hold all types of media on the same level. In the same way that a text-only newspaper is useless to a photojournalist, Twitter is similarly useless to a video editor but that does not mean for someone else with different objectives it cannot be a highly useful and successful tool. With that in mind, again, understanding the importance of considering different perspectives, whether in relation to Seditio, media forms or anything in the present moment is a very important skill.

Modernity and postmodernity stand side-by-side, not congruent but rather at odds with one another. It makes little sense to consider postmodernity without reference to its roots in the modern. However, even though modernity can stand alone, considering it alongside postmodernity can both greatly enrich and challenge tenets of modernity. The consideration of modernist metanarratives such as those of growth, progress and liberalism, along with the postmodern challenging of such grand narratives, can add a significant level of depth to the study of not just the present moment in which we live but specific sites too. Seditio's function and purpose, arguably the strangest barber in Sydney, is better understood after a consideration of both modernist and postmodernist ideas. It is through exploring critical theory and ideas such as a disregard for grand narratives or Marx's communist sentiments and applying them simultaneously to Seditio that we can gain a greater understanding of a left-of-centre site such as Seditio. We can then take that newly acquired knowledge and apply it to better understand the complex workings of the world around us in the present moment.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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