

The Real You: Paddington Markets and the Postmodern Search for the Self

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Paddington Markets, located on the grounds of the Paddington Uniting Church every Saturday, are defined by their emphasis on the ‘Natural’, the ‘Original’, the ‘Organic’ and the ‘Vintage’, all designed to appeal to our sense of authenticity in regards to our own identity. However, in an era of conflicting modern and postmodern ideas about the nature of reality and representation, identity is fast becoming a victim of uncertainty. So what does it mean to be an individual in today’s society? Is it ever possible to ‘be yourself’? Today, the struggle to find a unique identity is becoming increasingly pressing yet increasingly difficult. Paddington Markets embodies the way in which the search for identity is undertaken through consumerism, through its emphasis on the ‘authentic’ qualities of its products. This article will examine the way in which modernism and postmodernism have shaped the way we conceptualise reality, representation, the subject and identity, and the ways in which consumerism has adapted to suit the changing ideas of these two traditions. Through the theories of Baudrillard, Lyotard, Hall, Marx and with a little bit of help from Bon Jovi, the question of what identity means in a consumer society is explored through Paddington Markets.

It’s blue skies

*as Saturday morning
rises,
yawning,
sun shining,
falling on the stalls
lining
the church hall
and surrounding grounds.
Customers stroll around,
lazily grazing
on the sounds
and scents
and sights,
stopping now and then
to comment*

*on some “quite divine”
white chocolate candle,
or sandalwood night cream.*

*Steam rises
from pots of chai, eyes
turn to potted bonsai
and tourists flock
to oil paintings
of tourists
flocking to Bondi.*

*Here, it’s about the unique,
the DIY*

mystique
of handmade cards
and hand-spun scarves,
vases
carved from native wood
and feel-good claims
like 'Australian made',
'Rainforest safe',
'Organic',
'Authentic',
'Vintage'
and other clichés.
In this day and age,
we don't buy to have,
we buy to be,
and Paddington Markets
markets
identity.

“If you are someone” writes Baudrillard “can you ‘find’ your personality?” (1998, p.87) In today’s consumer society, we are told that we can – that we must. And what’s more, we can’t just be anyone, we have to be ‘ourselves’.

I ain't gonna be just a face in the crowd
 You're gonna hear my voice
 When I shout it out loud .
 (Bon Jovi 2000, 0:26 → 0:35)

But, Baudrillard asks, “where are you while this personality is haunting you? If you are yourself, do you have to be so ‘truly’?”. (1998, p.87) These questions highlight the issue of what it means to be an individual, and how we go about achieving it. In a culture of consumerism, the pursuit of individuality and through it, identity, is heavily undertaken through the consumption of products. (ibid, p.89) Paddington Markets provides an example of the way in which consumerism has evolved to suit the new “struggle to be someone” (Anderson 1990, p.132), which in turn demonstrates the way in which ideas regarding the nature of both identity and consumerism have shifted throughout time. These changes, in both society’s behaviour and ways of understanding the world, are representative of a wider social shift from modernist towards postmodernist ways of thinking.

The terms ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ are two that encompass a huge number of ideas, movements, and practices in a range of fields. Whilst modernism is widely accepted as comprising of a series of ideas rising out of the Age of Enlightenment (Best & Kellner 1991, p.2), the main agreement that scholars can seem to reach regarding postmodernism is that it is “remarkable elusive, and the definition of its boundaries exceedingly difficult, if not per se impossible.” (Huysen 1986, pp.58-59). Seeing as “postmodernism developed out of, or in response to, modernism” (Anderson 2008, p.89), it is important to look at these two traditions comparatively, as they are each defined by their differences to each other. Some of the important oppositions that define modernism and postmodernism include firstly, their approach to metanarratives, secondly, their concept of ‘reality’, and finally, their understanding of ‘the subject’. Paddington Markets provides an example of the effects that these contrasting ideas have on social practice, especially in terms of consumerism.

*“Victoria Lane – hand painted
art made and designed in Australia,
textured, abstract.”*

*“Our designs come in limited numbers
but the charm is endless
with each piece decidedly different
and delicately embellished.”*

*“Artisan Sourdough bakery
with varieties such as Fig & Walnut,
Potato & Rosemary and
Organic Wholemeal.”*

*“Sweetiepie Cup cake wrappers. A unique
wrapper featuring reversible
graphics to mix and match for every occasion.
Make every cupcake extra special.”*

*“Retro Star Design
specializes in unique stationary,
art and gifts inspired by
retro graphics & photography
of the 50s and 60s”*

*“Sher Vintage Clothing
– quality modern shoes and accessories-
interesting cloth-books.
Small range of new clothing –
antique clothing
available on request”*

(Paddington Markets 2011, para.1-23)

The popularity of the second-hand, the ‘original’ and face-to-face shopping over mass-produced, de-personalised and technologically efficient consumerism is representative of a postmodern disillusionment with the modernist concept of ‘progress’. The belief in the importance of progress is one that characterises modernity:

“Enlightenment philosophy is imbued with a sense of life being in transit from a primitive origin to a utopian end... Applied to individuals, this was a doctrine of self-improvement through effort and intelligence. Applied to society, it was the belief in the necessity of social progress... History is not an aimless chronicle but a developing process of constantly shifting struggles...” (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p.33)

However, postmodernists such as Lyotard argue that belief in overarching historical narratives, such as progress, is misguided and misused. “I will use the term *modern*” he writes “to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (1997, p.36) In Lyotard’s opinion, this self-legitimation through grand narratives is the key feature of modernity, whereas postmodernity consists of “an incredulity towards metanarratives” (ibid). Instead, postmodernism favours the “language games” that “only give rise to institutions in patches – local determinism.” (ibid, p.37)

The concept of the small narrative, where truth can be localised, as opposed to the grand narrative, where truth is universal, is a postmodern idea that stems from a wider understanding of the nature of reality, conflicting again with modernist theories:

“At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernity took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality.” (Sarup 1996, p.95)

However, this concept of an ‘underlying reality’ is disputed by postmodernism, which instead draws upon “a growing suspicion that all belief systems – all ideas about human reality – are social constructions.” (Anderson 1990, p.3) In postmodernism, this construction of reality is undertaken through the process of representation and signification. (Hall 1997, pp.1-2) Rather than simply *depicting* reality, representation *creates* reality:

“Baudrillard claims that in the contemporary world the boundary between representation and reality implodes, and that, as a result, the experience and ground of ‘the real’ disappear. In this new social order, it is signs and codes that constitute the ‘real’.” (Sarup 1996, p.111)

So what does this implosion of reality mean for identity? If there is no underlying ‘true essence’ to things, then how can we have a ‘true essence’ of self? How can we create a self at all?

*“I’ll buy it”
She says, smiling.*

*I’ve done it.
It’s not hard.
To convert people... People like her.*

*Most of the time they don’t even realise what they are. Who they are.
They don’t realise that the sort of person that...
does that...
isn’t the sort of person they want to be.*

But I show them.

First, they tell me. They admit.

“I normally only drink that powdered Chai... But I’ve tried the syrups before.”

*I bite my lip and nod at them, understandingly.
I put on a sympathetic face. I try to emanate forgiveness,
make them feel that the first step to redemption
is admission of your sins.*

Now, comes the magic.

*“Ahhh..” I say “powders and syrups... They tend to be..”
here, I pretend to search for the words
I’ve said a thousand times before.*

“Very sickly and artificial.”

*There’s a moment
while the message sinks in*

“Hmmm..” the customer says “I guess so”

*But I know what they’re thinking.
They’re wondering.*

Questioning themselves.

'Am I sickly and artificial? Why do I buy sickly and artificial things?'

I go on...

*"Lots of sweeteners, flavours and preservatives ...
Not really... well...
Authentic."*

Here, I've got them.

*'I AM authentic.' They're assuring themselves.
'I'm not like everyone else. I'm different. I'm real..'*

*"But what we sell" I continue
"is a hand-blended mix of all the REAL spices, all natural.
That's why we're called RealChai!"*

I beam at the customer.

They're hooked.

Here, in a pink embossed tin,

is the path to self-discovery.

Here's a chance to be as real as this Chai.

*"I'll buy it"
They say, smiling.*

Capitalism, ever the entrepreneur, has evolved to suit the desires and aspirations of society, and the popularity of the RealChai brand at Paddington Markets is a testament to this. The fact that "goods and objects... form a global, arbitrary, coherent system of signs..." (Baudrillard 1998, p.79) means that consumption is a language – a form of expression and representation – that creates reality in the same way as words or pictures. However, more than this, capitalism relies on the ability to create desires and aspirations, even down to the "cravings that can only be satisfied in the symbolic universe" (Anderson 1990, p.132), such as identity. Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew, was in part responsible for pioneering the idea that consumerism could be fuelled by desires, not by needs. He paid celebrities to express the idea that consumption could create identity (The Engineering of Consent 2002, 18:58 →19:08):

"I wonder why you all want to dress always the same, with the same hats and the same coats. I'm sure all of you are interesting and have wonderful things about you, but looking at you in the street you all look so much the same. And that's why I'm talking to you about the psychology of dress. Try and express yourselves better in your dress." – Mrs Stillman, 1920's Celebrity Aviator (The Engineering of Consent 2002, 19:22→ 19:46)

The ability to market different identities through products is fuelled by our postmodern, terrifying doubts that we lack an 'inner self' that is anything other than symbolic. Paradoxically, however, we are told that we must find 'our true self' and express it in our communications with others.

She tries on a decoupage bangle, and holds it out for her friends to view.

"Oh my god!" they exclaim with excitement "That is soooooo you!"

Baudrillard continues his questioning of this mentality: "...if I am myself, how can I be so 'more than ever'? Wasn't I entirely myself yesterday?" (1998, p.88) How, he wonders, can a product be 'you', or even make you 'you'? The concept of a constructed or 'performative' identity is another important postmodern concept, which opposes the modernist belief in the rational, self-contained subject. In modernist philosophy:

"it is the ability for self-determination, characterised by free decision-making, rationality and autonomy, that not only defines the humanist subject in general but also produces individual identity. (Anderson 2008, p.4)

However, postmodernism rejects the idea of an autonomous self, instead taking an approach that "sees identification as a construction, a process never completed". (Hall 1996, p.2) As such, we are constantly involved in a process of self-creation that involves defining ourselves through similarities and differences. (ibid, p.3) The power of consumerism lies in the fact that it can *sell* us these similarities and differences, arranged in patterns and codes as complex as any language.

*A black felt cloth drapes the table.
On it are about a dozen palm leaves,
dried and rolled up at the ends
like fragile canoes.*

*They're beautifully painted.
Blue
runs into gold,
and weaves
in and amongst
the hardened ridges
of the leaves.*

*Hues
of purple and charcoal-grey
play
in spirals and layers
across the surface of each piece,
each leaf
a unique canvas
for the hand that's painted these.*

*To sell them almost seems wrong –
they belong together,
forming something stronger
as a whole than just
one
by
one.*

Baudrillard asserts that products, "taken individually... have no meaning: it is their constellation, their configuration, the relation to these objects and their overall social 'perspective' which alone have a meaning". (1998, p.59) It is the strength of the product 'constellation' that makes Paddington Markets so effective as a site for consumerism, as products, stalls and prices all gain new meaning and significance when grouped with each other. Hence 'second-hand' becomes 'vintage', 'home-made' becomes 'designer' and 'unusual' becomes 'unique'; making it is acceptable to pay \$100 for a painted leaf. "It is evident" writes Baudrillard "that objects are never offered for consumption in complete disorder... they are always arranged to mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing

impulse towards *networks* of objects in order to captivate that impulse” (1998, p.27) In this sense, the context and social setting of the product become more symbolically valuable, and therefore economically valuable, than the product itself.

The added value that symbolism gives a product was criticised by philosophers such as Marx, who believed that products have an intrinsic worth that should always be mediated by the “labour inputs in production”. (Mandel 1990, p.14) The notion of a product holding ‘natural value’ which corresponds mainly to physical production is a modernist concept that holds on to the idea of an underlying ‘true essence’ to objects. However, “postmodernism’s preoccupation with the signifier rather than the signified... with surface appearance rather than underlying essence” (Sarup 1996, p.97) means that the concept of ‘natural value’ is, in itself, unnatural. Instead, as seen in Paddington Markets, value is yet another social construct, forming a symbolic relationship with both the object and the consumer.

What is important about products in a consumer society, however, is that they can embody not only economic value, but are also able to represent social values. In a consumer society, “Needs are directed not so much towards objects as towards values, and their satisfaction initially has the sense of signing up to those values.” (Baudrillard 1998, p.70) By purchasing the signs with which to display our personal values, we categorise ourselves within a system of differences and affiliations, participating in a process of identification which entails “the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of ‘frontier effects’.” (Hall 1996, p.3) As such, identity in the postmodern sense is not something that can be possessed, a “stable core of the self”, but “the process of becoming rather than being”. (ibid, p.3-4) Identities are not fixed, but “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed” (ibid, p.4).

Perhaps it is this increasing, postmodern fragmentation of identity that fuels our need for authenticity, our yearning for that Enlightenment belief in the ‘true self’. Paddington Markets, with its emphasis on the ‘Natural’, the ‘Original’, the ‘Organic’ and ‘Vintage’, becomes a site where these values, represented and symbolised in a myriad of different products and practices, can be accessed and re-affirmed. But does postmodernism have it right? Are the days of the ‘fixed self’ really over? If the postmodern world is one where representation is reality, where identities and meanings can shift and multiply along with the ‘truth’, then perhaps, one day, the ‘self’ will find itself real once more.

*Scotty, without a doubt, has the best stall in the markets.
He sells magic.*

*He shuffles, then holds out a deck of cards and flips the top one over.
It's the Queen of Hearts.
"See that card?" he says, in his South London accent "Remember it."
Then the card is gone, whisked back into the pack,
and is again being shuffled, blended, mingled,
united with the rest of the deck.
Then Scotty spreads the cards out, face down, in his hands.
"Pick a card" he says.
I do. I look at it and grin foolishly.
The Queen of Hearts – of course.
I look back up, smiling suspiciously. Scotty turns the cards face up.
"Just regular cards..." he says "now put that one back, anywhere you like."
The trick is repeated. There's a crowd now.*

Again, I choose the Queen.

*Again, I put the card back.
 Scotty shuffles expertly, and my card dives back amongst the others.
 He spreads the deck, and I pick a card.
 I frown.
 It's the 5 of Spades.
 "It's not mine..."
 "Ahh..." says Scotty. "But is this your card?"
 And he flips over the first card of the deck.
 I'm grinning again. "Wow..."
 "But what about this one? And this one?"
 He's flipped two more cards, and now there's three Queens in his hand.
 "What about these ones?"
 And there's the whole deck, all Queen of Hearts', spread out in front of me.
 "But there's one missing.." says Scotty. "What card did you pick?"
 I look back to the spade in my hand, but it's gone.
 Instead, I'm holding the Queen of Hearts.

 Perhaps I always was.*

Perhaps, one day, postmodernism, with its identity as fragmented and uncertain as our own, (a victim, here, of its own philosophies) will take a long, hard look at itself. A look at the differences and affiliations it has built itself upon. A look at its CD collection full of subjectivities, ephemerality, and socially constructed realities.

Perhaps, one day, modernism will do the same; stand in front of its wardrobe and ponder its coat-hangers full of meta-narratives, its assortment of imperial facts, its neatly folded rational subjects.

And they'll think to themselves:

"Is this really who I am? I'm different. I'm real.

Can people see that? Or is this all they see?"

And, faced with the fear of a constructed identity

Eager to re-affirm their own authenticity

Afraid that they too are just another collection of differences

They'll head to Paddington Markets.

Notes on contributor

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