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Negotiating meaning in the consumption of the past

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Abstract

The Internet and social networking technologies have facilitated communication between groups of retrophiles or fans of the past. The article seeks to examine motivations for retrophilic action and to discuss these ideas within the present late capitalist culture. The article discusses how retrophiles seem to use the past in order to (re)construct their individual and collective identities and it examines two recent media representations that present retrophiles in discourses of consumption and acquisition.

Keywords

nostalgia

the past

retrophiles

online communities

identity

discourse

Introduction

...if the present was in some sense unsatisfactory, the past provided the model for reconstructing it in a satisfactory form. The old days were defined – still often are – as the good old days and that is where society should return to. This view is still very much alive; all over the world people and political movements, define Utopia as nostalgia: a return to good old morality, that old time religion, the values of small town America in 1900, the literal belief in the Bible or Koran – which are ancient documents and so on. (Hobsbawm 1997: 34)

This article presents the view that retrophiles, people whose lifestyles are centred on the past, share significant characteristics with the wider fan community. These traits include a passionate engagement with details from a particular period in history, high levels of knowledge of the time in question and a reverence for the past. Jenkins (1992) emphasizes that media fans are producers and consumers of culture in that they write and participate within specific cultural contexts. Retrophiles, like these fans, immerse themselves in the aesthetic details of their period of interest and there is a drive, by many, to reproduce the past authentically for example in dress, home and lifestyle. The term ‘retrophiles’ is used loosely to define those people who are fans of the past and this can be used to describe people who ‘time travel’ to various locations in time e.g. the Roman period, the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth centuries or the 1940s and the 1950s. The latter periods are most popular with an increasing number of online sites dedicated to them. The term ‘retrophile’ is a wide classification that includes re-enactors (home front re-enactors; ‘pin-up’ girls; big band singers),

lifestyle enthusiasts (people who try to replicate particular styles and who meet with other enthusiasts at 1940s' events), people who like 'old' films (1940s' or 1950s' Hollywood cinema). Historical re-enactors see their role as educators and therefore serious and legitimate rather than play-acting (Harry and Edna's Home Front for example). Harry and Edna are war-time re-enactors who adopt a 1940s' lifestyle and make guest appearances to educate school children and other groups about the war (Harry and Edna's Home Front 2013). However, the performance of historical events might be said to be comparable to the actions of science fiction and fantasy fans who seek to escape the present or 'real life' by dressing as characters from their favourite programmes at fan conventions. The work of Roger Aden has been particularly useful in conceptualizing how retrophiles fit into the wider context of fandom. His work on symbolic pilgrimages, which reconciles the modernist, postmodernist and romanticist positions in relation to how fans negotiate their identities through engagement with popular stories, is relevant (Aden 1999). The symbolic pilgrimage is a conceptual framework for explaining the journeys that people make to personal 'shrines'. He suggests that fans who make symbolic pilgrimages recognize the postmodern consumer context and use this actively to transcend this consumerist culture by forming communities that are alternative to mainstream culture. Pilgrimage, he says, is a useful way of explaining the acts of 'leaving' home, visiting a 'sacred' place and meeting with kindred spirits. Retrophiles do this in their cyber-communities, where friendships and support networks are formed. There is a strong community where information is freely exchanged about historical artefacts, old films and film stars, pastimes, dress and etiquette.

The American artist and Anglophile, Denis Severs, who created the 'House in the Spitalfields' in London, a recreation of an archetypal eighteenth-century town house, is a good example of a fan who had a particularly strong romantic attachment to the past. The house is more than a museum and he created it as a living space where visitors could experience the warmth and ambience of a family home. People who visit it believe that they can feel the spirits of the imaginary family moving in the space.

The house was to recover its origins...and he set out to furnish and ornament its rooms so that it became a living image of the eighteenth-century house which it once had been. It had its own life and personality, which Dennis Severs felt compelled to revive and maintain. He even created an imaginary family, the Gervais or Jervis family, who would occupy the rooms and thus become the embodiment or shape of the house's spirit. (Ackroyd and Severs 2002: viii)

This type of 'living' heritage experience is worth noting as a symbolic place to which people make pilgrimages of a spiritual kind. Aden (1999) talks about how fans create personal symbolic promised lands that can be idealized and romantic. The romantic and aestheticized view of the past is a strong theme in retrophilic communities even to the point where historical fact is secondary to image and style.

This nostalgic view of the past – which may be real, imagined or both – is a phenomenon that many authors (Samuel 1994; Davis 1979; Lowenthal 1985) have noted to be prevalent within late capitalist or postmodern culture. This article seeks to

explore some of the themes of the past(s) that are important to retrophiles who engage with the 1940s and the 1950s, a period that sits on the cusp between living memory and historical phenomenon, so that it is relatively easy to compare nostalgia with historic fact.

Hobsbawm reminds us that the past exists as ‘a permanent dimension of the human consciousness, an inevitable component of the institutions, values and other patterns of human society’ (Hobsbawm 1997: 13). Additionally, however, it would seem that the fact that the past is complete and finite is the real attraction: ‘What we are nostalgic for is not the past as it was...but for the condition of having been, with a concomitant integration and completeness lacking in our present’ (Lowenthal in Chase and Shaw 1989: 29).

Nostalgia has been defined many times (by, e.g., Starobinski 1966; Davis 1979; Grainge 2002; Lowenthal 1985; Pickering and Keightley 2006) and was commonly considered as a longing (originally a home-sickness). It is still presented by some of these authors as a longing for something that is absent – real or imagined – a set of values or a different aesthetic style. As Davis (1979) suggests, there seems to be a yearning for some sort of Utopia and of course ‘utopia’ means ‘nowhere’. It could be perceived, therefore, as a desire for difference – something that the consumer society relentlessly insists upon (Baudrillard 1998; Featherstone 2004). Rather than home-sickness, though, nostalgia often seems to be the yearning for what people would prefer life to be like. This is often a mediated view of the past where, for example, when imagining the 1940s or the 1950s in Britain is about discourses of individuals standing together to cope with the London Blitz, tending their allotments to ‘dig for

victory' and generally helping each other out. Historical evidence that does not always fit happily with the utopian view, such as the fact that there was stealing from bombed houses, a vibrant 'black market' in rationed goods for those who could afford them (Campbell 2010) and a suspension of 'normal' (chaste) sexual behaviour in view of potential sudden death or 'wartime immorality' (Costello 1985), is played down or ignored. In the United States of the same period, a Capra-esque main street is envisaged with all that is considered as good about small-town life: a more structured sense of etiquette, more strictly defined social mores, better manners and more formal guides as to how men and women should relate to each other. Here, nostalgia is considered as a type of mourning for lives past and a longing for something that is unattainable, as one cannot 'really' go back there. This is its melancholic attractiveness. Aden states that fans of popular texts are drawn to these 'places' because they are different from their everyday lives and once fans make the symbolic journey they want to repeat it again because the experience was so comfortable (1999: 90). Some retrophiles will try to live the retro-lifestyle by decorating their houses and themselves in specific ways and by adopting styles of etiquette more appropriate to that period.

The past, however defined, is viewed as representative of a different and greatly improved society. This is clearly attractive to some people as there are many groups of retrophiles who seem to use the past to construct their identities. But the question remains as to what is the motivation of people who look back fondly to previous eras. Is it that they are inherently dissatisfied with the present day – so a form of escapism? Or is it that they are using the past to enhance and 're-enchant' or 'manage' the present? This article considers the types of Internet retro-sites that seek to provide

utopian spaces that seem to offer a place to go to escape from the present, but at the same time allow participants to rearm themselves with experiences that enhance the present. Accordingly, this article is structured as follows: first, it offers a consideration of the pre-conditions for retrophilia and potential reasons for why people engage with the past. Second, the article analyses and discusses examples of retrophilic activity set around the 1940s and the 1950s.

Views of the past

In part the way we regard the past may be culturally determined. Spinney (2005) reported on the research of Rafael Nunez of the University of California into the way humans develop abstract concepts like that of time. He noted the views of an Amerindian group, the Aymara, living in the high Andes, who regard the past in almost a mirror image of our own western European stance. The past is seen as in front of them and the future behind: the analogy comes to mind of sitting in a train with one's back to the direction of travel. Indeed, Harpur (2010) reminds that the idea of progress as a good thing, historically speaking, is a relatively recent one, emanating from the Enlightenment that promoted the 'sovereignty of Reason' (Harpur 2010: 100–01).

Earlier thinkers had assumed human nature to be relatively unchanging and often wondered whether a return to a more 'ideal past' might be the way forward. This is not a recent phenomenon: the ancients wrote of a 'Golden Age' when life was idyllic. The term 'idyll' comes from the Greek eidillion, a small picture, and the author of the *Idylls*, Theocritus (third century BCE), rather than describing 'big' themes such as

battles and the like, preferred scenes from everyday life, albeit an idealized version of it. The concept of an idealized past first appears in Europe in the late sixth-century BCE works of the Greek poet Hesiod, where the poet identifies the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, the Heroic Age and the (current) Iron Age. With the exception of the Heroic Age, Hesiod suggests that each succeeding age was worse than its predecessors. Rather like the Garden of Eden myth, the Golden Age is seen as a time when agriculture is unnecessary and all natural foods are provided gratis by the fruitful earth. Like the Garden of Eden, the Golden Age was said to have had a geographical location in the remote area of Arcadia, although other writers such as Theocritus located it in Sicily. Common to these idylls is the view of the past as a time of innocence, plenty, ease and peace.

For the Romans, as inheritors of many Greek cultural concepts, the view of the current age as far inferior to past ages was accepted by several contemporary writers, especially during the period of revolutionary change at the end of the Republican era. Sallust, Cicero and others compare the supposed tough and resilient early Romans with those of the late republic who are thought to be 'tainted' by the soft living of the Greeks and Orientals they encounter, a theme that occurs frequently in Roman literature (Juvenal, for example). After the establishment of the Roman Empire, the poet Virgil set his pastoral imitations of Theocritus (the *Eclogues* or 'short poems') back to an idealized Arcadia in Greece. But Virgil also introduced an element of political allegory to the extent of proposing in his fourth Eclogue that a new Golden Age of peace and justice was about to return under the reign of Emperor Augustus.

If ancient Greece looks back to Arcadia, ancient Rome looks back to Greece, and the writers and artists of the Italian Renaissance look back to the classical period, especially in Greece (the Middle Ages had used Latin as a universal European language, and the rediscovery of Greek fuelled knowledge of antiquity). Because the Renaissance is seen as instituting such a flowering of the arts it is sometimes forgotten that it is based on a form of retrophilia: the very name of re-birth suggests returning to the past. Subsequently there have been attempts by other artists and writers to cut out the high renaissance and return to its 'roots': the Pre-Raphaelites, for example, and the contemporaneous Arts and Crafts movement under William Morris. But in no case did these individuals wish *actually* to live like a person of antiquity, or an early renaissance craftsman, just as Virgil or Theocritus would not have wished to live as shepherds or happy peasants. In the Baroque style, rulers might commission a sculpture of themselves in Roman dress, sometimes worn with the elaborate wigs of the later seventeenth century, but would never have worn such clothing in everyday life.

Walsh (1992) presents a very solid case to explain the effects of modernity and postmodernity on our understanding of the past. The dramatic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in terms of people's understanding of time and space meant a loss of something fundamental – a loss of '*the sense of place*' (1992: 22, emphasis added). This, combined with the changes in daily life – something that became much more routinized – and the growth of consumerism, provided the foundations for what can be identified in postmodernity. Since World War II, there has been an acceleration in media and technology and an '*...intensification of those experiences and processes which emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries*' (Walsh

1992: 39). Postmodern culture is often defined by referring to the ‘bricolage’ of contemporary experience, while at the same time the underlining notions of fragmentation, alienation, insecurity and the transitory nature of that experience are prominent. Baudrillard (1994a; 1994b) claims that the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred and one of the defining characteristics of the postmodern world is the growth in the media industries. This, coupled with a thriving consumer culture, the fusion of styles and interplay of different polysemic signs, allow people to make informed selections from different aspects of ‘the past’ in order to define and redefine themselves. In late capitalism (Jameson 1991), the consumer of the twenty-first century is able to largely ignore the functional value of goods and services in favour of more symbolic values.

The demand for the past is real and this is evidenced by the viewing figures from TV history programming (such as reality history, documentaries, forensic history or historical drama and film). The *Antiques Roadshow* (BBC 2013) has in recent years drawn in audiences of between three and eight million (Holmwood 2008; BARB 2013). The most comprehensive study of recent history on TV has been carried out by Piccini (2006), who indicated that during 2005, 13000 television transmissions were made and that the top five programmes constituting 61 per cent of the sample were programmes about antiques.

Reproduction lifestyle products such as period telephones, mangles, antimacassars, light switches and kitchenware are popular and online retailers such as Lotty Blue (www.lottyblue.co.uk), Rose and Gray (www.roseandgray.co.uk) and Vintage Actually (www.vintageactually.co.uk) are examples of sites where people can buy

items to fit their retro lifestyles. Vintage is big business in the United Kingdom, with British people spending over £40 million per year (Anon. 2013). A Mintel report about consumption of nostalgic homewares (2010b) notes an increase in these products and a longing for the ‘good old days’ precipitated perhaps by the recent recession. The consumer society provides the opportunities to engage with the past in a more tangible way. It is possible to engage with the past if we are financially solvent and willing to participate in the (vintage) consumer cycle (Oakley 2011). Consumer lifestyle data indicate that the audience for TV history are people in the over 55 years category (Mintel 2010a) and a similar demographic exists for visits to heritage or living history sites (Mintel 2008).

Retrophiles

Retrophile: One who greatly loves artefacts and aesthetics from the past. Typically associated with hipsters, whose attire often hearkens back to past decades, retrophilia often goes hand and hand with a general distaste for modern culture. (Urban Dictionary 2011)

People who adopt and enjoy ‘retrophilic’ lifestyles enthusiastically embrace particular periods in time. The past is, therefore, a significant part of their contemporary culture and seems to contribute towards the construction and re-construction of both their individual and collective (community) identities (Smith 2008).

Retrophiles perform their historical lifestyles on a daily basis, absorbing and externalizing period detail in both home and dress. Like other types of fans, they

collect artefacts from their favourite periods in history and they try to replicate past lifestyles in varying degrees. This can include the adoption of social etiquette, language and customs. In her discussion of the 'Sixties scene' in Germany, Jenß (2004) stresses the combinatory elements that make up the look rather than one style that is followed religiously. She describes participants' knowledge-gathering practices through interaction with each other, media sources and original artefacts, and suggests that the quest for authenticity is achieved by total immersion in the period. The obsession of 'owning' the past, something that drives many re-enactors, is also explored by Thompson in her work with war re-enactors (Thompson 2004). 'To become a "credible" member and to perform the style convincingly...people have to gain the appropriate (sub)cultural capital, which they then show off in dress practices, music knowledge, the "right" dance style, and so on' (Jenß 2004: 395). It is the emotional connection that retrophiles have to particular 'finds' that makes them similar to the wider fan communities. For example, Jenson (Lewis 1992b) talks about how thrilled she was when she got the chance to touch Patsy Cline's mascara wand.

With the introduction of social networking technologies, individuals have easier access to 'like-minded' people who share the same interests. Multiple sites, retro-blogs and online communities exist that focus on certain periods in history. Large numbers of people (The Fedora Lounge has in excess of 2000 members) are involved in interacting with each other about specific historical themes, mediated by texts set in the past (novels, films). Key themes for discussion include clothing, make-up, film stars, music and the retro-lifestyle (The Fedora Lounge 2013; Jess 2012). Through these media and communication tools people appear to be drawing on real or imagined structures from the past that can provide support and stability in a culture

today that they perceive to be increasingly devoid of any meaningful discourse/structure.

In recent years, the media have promoted interest in groups and individuals who live a lifestyle that is retro. The *Daily Mail* has published two such articles recently: ‘Time warp wives: Meet the women who really do live in the past’ (Appleyard 2008) and ‘Pictured: The man who loves living in the 1940s (outside loo and all)’ (Oliver 2010). Both articles generated much public discussion and attracted both positive comments and negative criticism. There is a tendency in the media, evidenced by these articles, to portray retrophiles, as opposed to participants in living history programmes (e.g. *1940s House*, (Graham 2002); *Coal House*, (Morgan 2007–2009), as quaint, vulnerable or eccentric. Media discourse such as the Channel 4 documentary *Time Warp Wives* (Hewitt 2008) on women who live as though they were housewives in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s suggests that retrophiles are unable to cope with modern-day life and therefore seek solace in the safety of the past. Ben Sansum, the subject of *Daily Mail* article ‘The man who loves living in the 1940s’, is described as ‘obsessed’. The cottage is ‘*full of quirks*’ (emphasis added). The public responses to the article were mixed and some were offensive, suggesting that Sansum is abnormal and fetishized: ‘*crackpot*’, ‘*a bit creepy*’ and ‘*telling that he is not married*’ (Oliver 2010, emphasis added). This resulted in some retrophiles making comments defending their chosen lifestyles: ‘*at least we are not hurting anyone*’; ‘*It’s a more satisfying, creative and inventive way to live*’ (emphasis added).

Some online comments were particularly critical about the furnishing of Sansum’s home, pointing out the ‘errors’ of having 1930s’ furniture yet a radio from the 1960s.

He ‘confesses’ to owning modern appliances, too, thereby, implying that he is unable to follow his retro-lifestyle authentically. There were, however, very many positive and supportive comments that underline the popularity of retrophilic lifestyles. Distinctions can be made between people commenting who are younger retrophiles such as the woman who said she had booked the Cabinet Rooms for her vintage-themed wedding and older people who actually have more solid memories of this period of time. There were a number of people who responded nostalgically to the pictures of artefacts, commenting ‘I remember the mangle. It was my job. We only had cold water and an outside loo’ and ‘We had fitted carpets and rugs purchased before the war so this cottage is accurate’ (Oliver 2010). There is a marked difference in the discourse, then, between the comments from those with actual memories of the period and those who now aspire to having a 1940s’ home. Discussion here will focus on the latter group. The reasons for desiring a retro-life were given as follows: ‘It’s fun and different. Plus things were made to last back then. None of this “throw away” culture that we have now’ or ‘wish that community spirit and atmosphere was still here now’.

A great many comments suggested that Britain was a better place and despite the war it was also a better time: ‘two world wars but Britain was better to live in then’ and ‘Evocative of a more decent, happier time’. These comments were made by a mix of older people who were relying on memories and younger people who at times referred to parents’ and grandparents’ stories. Both remarks refer to an idealized past and a ‘decent, happier time’ is highly contentious.

Motivation for retrophilia

The past is a highly marketable concept in commercial terms – a period house is, for example, an endless quest for materials and objects – reconstruction, reclamation, reconstitution, recycling and reproduction. There are many outlets that sell reclaimed articles such as telephones, ceiling roses, hooks, wall switches and other domestic accessories. It is, perhaps, the ‘(sub)cultural capital’ (Jenß 2004), though, that is less problematic to identify and define than the satisfaction and feelings of well-being gained from associating with the past. Psychologically, the past is more complex to conceptualize because it is both personal and collective; it becomes an integral part of people’s personal identities and their collective conscious too. Characters from historical fiction such as Anne Shirley or Mr Darcy are not simply identified with but seem to become reference points for who some retrophiles are. Online retrophiles adopt avatars from Hollywood movies such as *Gilda* or movie stars Rita Hayworth. There may be many reasons as to why people wish to look back. Partly, it may be an inherent dissatisfaction with the present and this is evident throughout retrophilic discourse. ‘Retro-blogs’ and online communities of retrophiles frequently discuss the shortcomings of contemporary life, which is often cited as too fast, disposable and lacking in moral structure. This view is evidenced by one of the people commenting on the Mail article (Oliver 2010): ‘I wish I could turn the clock back and get out of this horrible age we live in now’. This is a view explored by Aden (1999), who recounts how fans make ritualistic journeys to the ‘shrine’. Fans attend concerts, football games, science fiction conventions and retrophiles make symbolic pilgrimages to the 1940s’ virtual bar, re-enactment sites and dark tourism shrines. The latter being when people make pilgrimages to sites associated with tragedy or death e.g. holocaust. The idea of time travelling is clearly very attractive to many

people, a view that is supported not only by the increasing numbers of online retro-communities and blogs but also by the genre of time-travel novels (e.g. those written by Susanna Kearsley and Barbara Erskine) and re-enactment events that take place round the country e.g. 1940s' dances such as the ones taking place at Hedna's: a vintage nightclub in Milton Keynes; recreation of Edwardian, World War I and World War II events that two re-enactors, Harry and Edna perform; *Life on the Home Front* at Holme Village near Peterborough (see Harry and Edna, *Vintage Sweethearts* 2013; Rod's 1940s Events Calendar 2014).

The way the past is marketed to us frequently underlines its difference – its 'otherness' from our 'real' environment. Stylistically, the past is different, but retrophiles frequently mention pace of life too. Where the late Capitalist age is media and technology-led, the early part of the twentieth century, for example, is said to have been paced more slowly through the absence of technological developments such as computers. The pace of life, of course, is relative to each particular time and place but it is perhaps this contrast that is attractive and it seems that way to the 'Mail' commentators. It can only be from the present point, however, that we have our own perceptions of the past and these interpretations are only ever partial, unique and fluid. Each individual has a world-view and a knowledge-base that is created and sustained by their own experiences, something that Aden (1999) refers to as developing a personal sense of place. This would go some way towards explaining our perceptions of our own history – the experiences that we have had during our lifetimes. When we go beyond that experienced time – the act of time travelling (Lowenthal 1985) – to periods where we have no real experiences, we rely on mediated fragments, for example, older generations and media sources. The 1940s

and 1950s are, therefore, particularly interesting to many people at the moment as they are on the earlier cusp of life-time experience.

Escapism is an oft-cited reason for engagement with the past and this is not an unusual or a novel concept – nor is it particularly unique to our time as the ‘golden age’ myths prove. However, escapism is a characteristic very much in line with a postmodern view of the world in that it is an active process by which people can address and counter the notions of fragmentation, uncertainty and instability (Bauman 2000; Sarup 1996). Our obsession with recent pasts may mean a reaffirmation of the self – the illusion that points to when we were fulfilled and happy – for some this may be childhood, young adulthood, student life. Many who write about fandom emphasize the escapist function in relation to reading romance novels (Modleski 2007; Radway 1991) or re-writing science fiction (Lewis 1992a).

There is also urgency within contemporary society to search for the genuine when we look to the past. But many question the existence of authenticity within the postmodern world as essentially postmodernism posits no overarching ‘truth’ only individual ‘truths’. Aden (1999) reconciles this desire for the structure seemingly provided by modernism and the multiple realities found in postmodernism by suggesting that fans negotiate and reinterpret popular narratives that move beyond conventional ‘linear’ history. He thereby combines the two theoretical positions. We cannot deny the role played by consumerism in contributing towards our reconstruction of the past and need to acknowledge the fact that retrophiles often buy products that either simply resemble items from previous historical periods or go to great lengths to find the genuine article that is inscribed with some romantic

authenticity – such as a Roman coin or a Victorian silver tea set. The popularity of *The Antiques Roadshow* (BBC 2013) is evidence of this. In doing this we attempt to distance ourselves from the present in some way. Jenß (2004) suggests that the perceived authenticity of the object merges with the subject, thereby empowering the individual to feel unique. The vintage phenomenon, then, has given us more scope for making ourselves ‘different’ (in appearance/attitude). There is a strong desire to be exclusive or ‘elite’, as patterns of consumption show, reflected also in advertising and marketing, and therefore to be different from everybody else. As Haug (1986) suggests in his influential work about commodity aesthetics, consumer identity is formed in terms of language, clothing and our self-awareness. In the early twenty-first century, there seem to be fewer set styles to which people need to conform. Consumers may, therefore, believe that their particular individual style is unique but uniqueness is profoundly questionable in the postmodern society: a view that Jameson attests to in what he refers to as the ‘end of individualism’ (Jameson in Foster 1985: 114).

(Re)constructing retrophilic identity

Late capitalist culture with its pervasive insistence on consumerism has alerted us to the paradoxical complexity of experience and identity. Experience is both defined and self-defining – defined by corporate ideologies and market segmentation, the commercialization of the emotions – but also self-defining by the individual who is able to deal with the contradictions of postmodern life, such as authenticity, hyper-reality, irony. Sarup (1996) notes that, ‘...personal identities are far more complex and shifting than is usually thought, that people have multiple, apparently

contradictory, identities at any one time'. The idea that people construct and reconstruct an identity or indeed multiple identities in the form of self-structured narratives is of particular relevance here. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) refer to the fact that the consumer is permitted to decide who and what he or she wants to be, although, paradoxically these choices are influenced by the consumer society and they also imply that media products play a significant role in this process. In postmodern society 'consumption is a mode of being, a way of gaining identity, meaning and prestige...' (Sarup 1996). This is a view also endorsed by Jean Baudrillard (1998), who suggested that consumers believe that the acquisition and externalization of signs of affluence will result in happiness and fulfilment.

Ricoeur's (1990) narrative identity theory refers to the process of constructing a narrative identity for ourselves, and, therefore, '...we come to know ourselves by the narratives we construct to situate ourselves in time and place' (Elliot and Wattanasuwan 1998: 133). It may also be argued, therefore, that retrophiles use media products such as period drama, living history to the same effect. The fact that individuals use the literature of the early nineteenth century such as the novels of Jane Austen or indeed any historical time as a point of reference for who they are bears out Ricoeur's (1990) ideas of narrative and emplotment. Jenkins (1996) suggests that our individual identity is validated through social interaction. Collectively, groups of individuals interact with each other and exchange information or experiences. Consumers seem to actively engage with the various texts of the past in order to validate and confirm beliefs and attitudes associated with the self, thereby reaffirming and reconstructing identity(ies). Communities of retrophiles like other fan

communities encourage respect for people's beliefs and lifestyle choices, thereby shaping their identities through the interaction with each other.

People seem to be attracted by all sorts of mediated representations of the past. How and why does this phenomenon manifest itself exactly and how does it affect identity construction? Sarup (1996) states, 'the past does not exist except in the sense that we have to interpret past events and, in so doing, create history, identity and ourselves' (Sarup 1996: 46). Both Sarup (1996) and Ricoeur (1990) talk about forming identity through narratives. The stories that we tell are shaped for a particular context – Sarup says that we include some things and exclude others – they emphasize some elements and subordinate others. This process, he suggests, 'is carried out in the interests of constituting a story of a particular kind' and that,

identity ... may perhaps be best seen as a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash. These writings consist of many quotations from the innumerable centres of culture, ideological state apparatus and practices: parents, family, schools, the workplace, the media, the political parties, the state. (Sarup 1996: 25)

How, then, do retrophiles construct and reconstruct the self within particular time periods and locations?

The stories that we tell about our own lives help us to make sense of ourselves and also allow others to understand us. It is the structure of the narrative that is ordered and at the same time open to endless interpretation and re-visioning.

Giddens (1991) talks of the 'reflexive project of the self', where we are constantly training the self to be different.

The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual 'supplies' about herself. A person's identity is not to be found in behaviours, nor...in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. (Giddens 1991: 54)

There would seem to be considerable commonality between retrophiles and the wider fan community in terms of their knowledge and commitment to their particular objects of fandom, the journeys or pilgrimages that fans make to their personal 'shrines' and the respect and support that they offer to each other collectively.

In postmodern society, the 'self' is, arguably, less stable and perhaps it is, to use Ricoeur's theory, the narratives that we construct about our lives that present the self as solid and integrated. Although Jameson questions the validity of the modernist conception of the integrated self,

...individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is "dead"; and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological. (Jameson in Foster 1985: 115)

McAdams (1993) suggests that today it is more challenging to understand identity and how we relate meaningfully to the world: 'we are faced with a rich assortment of alternative and competing ideological frameworks, and a pervasive scepticism about the power of any traditional or institutional belief system to address all of our ideological concerns' (McAdams 1993: 187). Gergen (1991) sees the emergence of the self as a process from Romanticism, where the self has depth, passion and creativity through Modernism, with its emphasis on the rationale and reasoning to Postmodernism and a state of social saturation.

Under Postmodern Conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction. It is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold. (Gergen 1991: 7)

The postmodern condition allows for the continuous reconstruction of identity and playful practices of reconfiguring the self. Further, retrophiles use their affinity with the past – various pasts – to confirm who they are. However, it is Aden (1999) who has managed skilfully to work with the concepts in Romanticism, Modernism and Postmodernism, and this provides the framework in which to examine the retrophilic lifestyle most usefully.

Conclusion

This article has sought to discuss some examples of retrophilic lifestyles and offer new explanations for why people engage with the past in contemporary society. The research does not suggest that there is a simple reason such as escapism for retrophilic motivation and initial evidence seems to indicate a more complex picture. Preliminary examination of retrophilic discourses on Internet sites suggests that it is not that people necessarily have a longing for some authentic and original concept of the past itself – it may be, however, the completeness of past experience that they really desire. The certainty of the past is, in part, what seems attractive and the fact that assurance can be given that the present will follow. There is a need to re-appraise and characterize the postmodern context and it is often defined now as fragmented, insecure, a risk-culture, an acceleration of time and the collapse of time–space distanciation. Examples of reaction to this type of present may be drawn from the consumption of media products about the past such as films, fan fiction and heritage re-enactment, retrophiles or fans of the past trying to live in virtual communities. While retrophiles and nostalgists express a desire to leave the present it may be because the past is complete and distant from them. Ironically, retrophiles are able to have retro-lifestyles successfully because they live in the present, where their experiences are enhanced by the choice afforded to them by both the consumer society and the Internet. Thus while a motivating factor for the retro-lifestyle is the desire to leave the present, it is the opportunities in contemporary society that enable them to construct alternative realities more effectively. It could be said that retrophilia is not possible except in a postmodern society where people can exercise endless choice in the retro-marketplaces.

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