

Change and Continuity: The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Through Tradition and Postmodernism

Eloise Flanagan

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate, through the frameworks of tradition and postmodernism, how continuity and change are impacting on the message and aesthetic of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. In detail, it will look at the role and contribution of invented tradition, ritualistic practices, globalisation, tourism, commercialism and simulation as concepts through which we may understand, through the festival, how the conflict between tradition and postmodernism are at play in our society today. Since 1978, Sydney Mardi Gras has proliferated as one of the world's leading celebrations of gay and lesbian rights, transforming Sydney into a highly commercialised and cosmopolitan tourist destination. By critically analysing the festival through tradition and postmodernism, it will open up ideas for discussion such as whether or not postmodern concepts such as globalisation and simulation compromise the original purpose and message of the festival, and thus its authenticity and integrity as a celebration of diversity, as well as looking at Mardi Gras as an invented tradition. This conflict between continuity and change in Mardi Gras reflects societies ambition in the present time to reconnect with tradition in this increasingly postmodern world.

Part I: Tradition

The term 'tradition' refers to a "set of practices, a constellation of beliefs, or a mode of thinking that exists in the present, but was inherited from the past." (Gross 1992 p.8). It derives from the Latin verb tradere, meaning to transmit or to "give something to someone for safekeeping." (Gross 1992, p. 9). However, Giddens (1999) argues that "endurance over time is not the key defining feature of tradition," and that "much of what we think of as traditional... is actually a product at most of the last couple of centuries" (Giddens 1999). This introduces the concept of 'invented tradition,' which differs from Gross' understanding of tradition in that it involves "'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period" (Hobsbawm 1993, p. 1). In conjunction, Holtorf (1998) noted Hobsbawm's argument that "invented traditions occurred more frequently at times of rapid social transformation when 'old' traditions were disappearing."

This concept can be applied to the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, which transpired at a time when people publicly sought to inculcate the idea of equality between gay and straight people in Australia. As society grew more secularised, 'traditional' religious views of homosexuality as something condemnable and sinful were being superseded by values of social justice and equality. Invented traditions also imply a level of continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1993, p. 1), illustrated in the festival with the parade, which originated at the first demonstration in 1978. This 'tradition' has been maintained and made more elaborate over time as the centrepiece of the festival today.

Postmodernism

Due to the diversity of opinions regarding what constitutes something as 'postmodern', it seems almost impossible to limit it to just one definition. However Lyotard (1997, p. 36) manages to encapsulate what many people have argued; that postmodernism represents a "state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the 19th century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts." Postmodernism emerged during the 1970s and 1980s as a challenge to the "basic tenets of modern social theory and method, and sociology more generally" (Gotham 2007, p. 295). It has been represented as a period of social life that postdates modernity, a form of cultural sensibility, an aesthetic style that is expressive of the ethos of the period and as a mode of thought (Morley 1996, p. 50). However it is generally accepted that postmodernism grew as a reaction to modernism, and thus can only be defined in relation to the modern (Morley 1996, p. 56). Malpas (2005, p. 31) notes Jameson's perspective that the term postmodern

Is not just another word for the description of a particular style. It is also... a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order.

Furthermore, Gotham (2007, p. 293) underlines Harvey and Soja's understanding of postmodernism as incorporating "the rise of a globalised form of capitalism, a restructuring of space and territorial identity, and the ascendancy of information technologies and media saturated society [that] intimate a new epoch of chaos, fragmentation, discontinuity and ephemerality." The chapter will explore Mardi Gras through the framework of postmodernist concepts such as globalisation, which Malpas described as a new trend in a "culture fundamentally different from that experienced by earlier generations" (Malpas 2005, p. 34).

Part II

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras transpired at a time of rapid social transformation, quickly establishing itself within Sydney's culture through its ritualistic practices and annual repetition. Hobsbawm (1993, pp. 1-2) and Giddens (1999) both agree that the distinguishing characteristics of invented traditions are ritual and repetition. According to Hobsbawm (1993, p. 4), inventing traditions is essentially a "process of formalisation and ritualisation, characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition." He comments on how invented traditions attempt to create meaning and purpose by instilling a sense of realism and history in their actions through repetition and ritualistic practices, which he describes as "quasi-obligatory" due to the fact that they are largely factitious (Hobsbawm 1993, p. 2). Within just a couple of years since it first began in 1978, Mardi Gras had established its own rituals and time in the year when it would be held annually. By 1979 it had attracted 3000 people to the parade (double the number of the previous year), in 1980 the post-parade party was introduced and by 1981 the decision had been made to move the event forward from winter to two weeks during the summer (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). It was during these first few formative years that Mardi Gras established its rituals of the parade, post-parade party and fancy dress, as well as allocating two weeks towards the end of February for the event to be held every subsequent year.

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is an example of an invented tradition that has maintained continuity with the past by upholding its most notable ritual: the parade. In 1978 a

group of approximately 1500 demonstrators walked down Oxford Street accompanied by a truck with a small music and sound system, “some in fancy dress and some simply rugged up against the cold” (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). What began as a small celebration that was met with police violence had soon evolved into a large-scale event of “vibrant energy, outrageous floats, lavish costumes, stunning designs and wild dancing” (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). The parade quickly came to be recognised as the focal ‘tradition’ of Mardi Gras as continuity with the festival’s origins had been maintained each year. Mardi Gras demonstrates in this way the contrast between the “constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant” (Hobsbawm 1993, p. 2). The need to uphold certain practices that establish continuity with the past, no matter how recent, as well as adapting to changes in society and its people is a central aspect of tradition, which is demonstrated in Mardi Gras through the continuation of its ritual practices such as the parade.

Additionally, it is a commonly held view that tradition can unite people and imbue them with a sense of pride and purpose that they are preserving something important, through mediums such as festivals. “Tradition can provide the cohesion that holds together social life” (Gross 1992, pp. 9-10). The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras attempts to do just this, as Carbery illustrated through the words of Ken Davis, “we wanted a way to involve people... something that would be a celebration of gay and lesbian pride and freedom, a real celebration” (Carbery 1995, p. 10). In spite of the fact that the Sydney Mardi Gras is still a very young event in the Australian calendar, it has regardless attempted to instil ritualistic practices that contribute to the developing ‘traditions’ of Mardi Gras, such as the parade, the post-parade party and the overall theme of extravagance. The idea to advocate gay and lesbian rights through a festival, which was less confrontational than the standard form of protest, has proved in the long term to be an effective way of establishing these traditions in the event and ensuring the festival’s longevity. Waterman elucidated this by using the definition of festival from *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1998, p. 57), which stated that ‘festival’ involved “a social gathering convened for the purpose of celebration or thanksgiving. Such occasions were originally part of a ritual nature and were associated with mythological, religious and ethnic traditions.” Hence according to this definition, tradition and festivals go hand in hand as a way of uniting people through ritual practices and repetition. In addition, Hobsbawm noted one of his general observations of invented traditions post 19th century as “those establishing or symbolising social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities” (Hobsbawm 1993, p. 9). Therefore it is evident that whilst traditions themselves can effectively unite people and communities, such as the gay/lesbian and straight communities in Australia, festivals can also provide these crucial linkages by being the medium through which people are able to experience and live out tradition.

However in an increasingly globalised and commercialised world, Mardi Gras has demonstrated the difficulty of staying truly authentic and retaining its traditions.

“Some in Sydney’s gay and lesbian communities feel strongly that Mardi Gras has ‘sold out’ to the corporations in its attempts to win sponsorship dollars” (Markwell 2002, p. 87). Mardi Gras’s corporate sponsorship with national and international companies such as QANTAS, Telstra and Smirnoff (Markwell 2002, p. 87) has proved to be a contentious issue, because without it, it is possible to infer that Mardi Gras would cease to generate the required funds needed to continue the festival in future years. This is the same with tourism, as evidence shows that increased revenue generated by the tourism industry has enabled the festival to continue staging its enormous and costly activities. In 2002, Mardi Gras went into receivership

due to “a combination of reduced tourist numbers after September 11th, a tripling of insurance costs and a stubbornly high cost base [that] had sent the organisation into the red” (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). The receivership demonstrated the importance of securing enough funds to keep the festival, and its traditions, alive. However corporate sponsorship, tourism and the festival’s new vision of being inclusive of the straight community (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012) in order to generate those crucial funds, has received substantial amounts of criticism, as some believe it is detracting from the original message, purpose and aesthetic of the event. Gotham (2007, p. 300) encapsulates this argument in his analysis of the New Orleans Mardi Gras, which can also be applied to Sydney’s Mardi Gras in that, “media coverage, corporate advertising and tourist modes of presentation frame Mardi Gras as a commodity-spectacle rather than a community-oriented festival.” However unlike the New Orleans Mardi Gras, which employs cheap Asian labour to manufacture its related merchandise and paraphernalia, Sydney’s Mardi Gras attempts to retain some level of localisation by supporting local artists and residents in the construction of the parade floats, costumes and props. Hence whilst the preserving of tradition in this postmodern reality has shown to be a challenge to Mardi Gras with its increasing globalisation, without the needed costs required to support such a large event, these endangered traditions would cease to survive in the future.

In contrast, the rise of postmodernity has seen Mardi Gras undergo change since its conception, largely due to increasing globalisation, tourism and commercialism. What began as a small protest to support the gay and lesbian rights movement that was occurring in the US at the time, has henceforth transformed into a large-scale tourist attraction, with the monetary support of various corporations. This links in with Lyotard’s analysis that “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold... the goal is exchange” (Malpas 2005, p. 36). This relates to Mardi Gras which began as a small niche market and has since evolved into a highly commercialised and mainstream tourist attraction. Gotham (2007 p.293) provides a postmodernist analysis of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, however his findings can be compared to the Sydney Mardi Gras insofar as in recent years, greater tourism investment, media coverage and advertising, as well as more attempts to commodify and sell the festival to corporate sponsors are impacting on the changing aesthetic of the celebration.

Gotham (2007, p. 296) noted Baudrillard’s description that one of the central tenets of postmodernism is that we live in ‘the age of simulation,’ “to the extent that capitalism has moved into a new stage of development where the production of simulations rather than commodities per se now dominates the world.” According to Gotham (2007, p. 296), ‘simulation’ implies a play of “entertaining images, spectacles, and attractions that obliterate the distinctions between real and illusory conditions or events”. In addition, he explained that once simulations begin to define the world, reality becomes ‘hyperreal’ to the extent that “people view the image as more authentic (hyperreal) than reality and the boundary between images and reality implodes” (Gotham 2007, p. 296). Furthermore, “in a world of simulation and implosion, the power of distinctions collapses and the fantasy worlds of celebrity, entertainment and spectacle become the standard and code to evaluate real life” (Gotham 2007, pp. 296-297). In relation to Mardi Gras, it is possible to see how economic elites, corporations and tourism organisations utilise spectacle and entertainment in order to transform the celebration into “a major tourist attraction and explicit money making operation” (Gotham 2007, p. 297). Corporations such as QANTAS, Smirnoff and Telstra provide considerable funds through which the Mardi Gras committee can continue selling the image of the festival as a spectacle of glitz and glamour and entertainment. However this approach masks the reality of the struggle and confrontation that Sydney’s Mardi Gras has

experienced in order to get to this stage, thus conveying the hyperreality in the marketing of Mardi Gras.

Moreover, the use of corporate sponsors, media partners and television have been essential in generating revenue, as Gotham (2007, p. 294) outlines Mardi Gras symbols and motifs are used as marketing slogans to stimulate consumer demand. Corporations use the symbols and motifs of Mardi Gras as “imaging devices” (Gotham 2007, p. 294) to promote their brand through Mardi Gras’s audience, e.g. Smirnoff released a new set of flavours whilst advertising Mardi Gras. This has enhanced the appeal of the festival to national and international audiences, as well as that of the products of these corporations. However, this has also generated debate over whether these sponsorships and marketing slogans are discrediting the integrity and core message of the festival as a celebration of homosexuality and diversity.

According to the NSW Tourist Commission, as outlined by Carbery (1995, p. 186), Mardi Gras has played a “valuable role in reinforcing Sydney’s image as a vibrant cosmopolitan city.” It was with this spirit that Mardi Gras was first televised on national television by the ABC in 1994, much to the controversy of its audience. Carbery (1995, p. 193) notes the then managing director of the ABC David Hill’s defence for televising the 50-minute program of edited highlights from the parade, “Mardi Gras is now a major Australian and indeed world festival and the parade is the centrepiece of it”. It produced the ABC’s best ever ratings on a Sunday night, with 45% of viewers from Sydney, 30% from Melbourne, 21.5% in Brisbane, etc. (Carbery 1995, p. 194). This coverage dramatically increased the national and international recognition of Mardi Gras, with records showing a 122% increase in print, radio and TV coverage from 1993 to 1994 (Carbery 1995, p. 195). In 1997 the event moved to Channel 10, the first commercial broadcaster to cover the event (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). It is with the aid of these corporate sponsors and media partners as well as televised coverage of the event that contributed to the increased national and international tourism industry that helped to transform the festival.

Gotham (2007, p. 299) notes how John Urray described tourism as postmodern “because of its particular combination of the visual, the aesthetic, the commercial and the popular.” With this definition in mind, it is evident that simulation often works in conjunction with tourism, which has resulted in vast changes to the Mardi Gras festival over time. “Tourism is not about representing or advertising real or authentic representations of a place or culture to attract visitors and investments... it is about simulating local culture to appeal to and satisfy tourist’s demands and interests” (Gotham 2007, p. 299). Mardi Gras today combines spectacle and simulation in order to generate an international tourism industry. The rate of growth for parade and post-parade party attests to this, as statistics show that since 1978, parade audiences doubled each year until it reached 50,000 in 1984 and the post-parade party increased from 700 in 1981 to approximately 6000 three years later (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). Mardi Gras has proved to be economically beneficial in the mid 1980s when interstate and international tourists who flocked to the festival generated an estimated \$38 million for the NSW economy (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). As well as this, in 2009 Mardi Gras celebrated with its largest parade to date, with 10,000 participants (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). As Markwell (2002, p. 85) describes it, the transformations of Mardi Gras “is now inextricably framed within a global gay and lesbian tourism industry that demands spectacle, consumption of experience, and that requires considerable corporate sponsorship.”

Furthermore, Morley highlights the homogenising process of globalisation as “geographical boundaries of a nation are transcended by advertising, marketing and satellite television” that move towards creating a global village (1996, p. 56). During the 1990s the Internet accelerated this process, “with a burgeoning market for buying and selling Mardi Gras memorabilia and paraphernalia, souvenirs and trinkets” (Gotham 2007, p. 301). It is through these processes that Markwell believes Sydney has become one of the world’s leading gay and lesbian cities, “a city that has changed from an industrial port to a cosmopolitan, global capital increasingly dependent, for the last two to three decades, on an economy driven by consumption and leisure” (2002, p. 82). Despite its globalised character, Mardi Gras continues to exhibit features of a localised festival by employing local residents and artists to construct the floats, costumes and props for the parade. In 2011, with the support of the City of Sydney and the Lord Mayor Clover Moore, as well as sponsorship from Google, a new workshop space opened in Redfern, which was “well-utilised by the LGBTIQI community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex), with ten community groups and approximately 85 people making use of the space to construct Parade props,” as well as the construction of seven floats (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). In addition it “proved very useful in terms of providing media with good photo and filming for broadcast opportunities and was frequently used for media interviews throughout the season.” (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2012). In this way Mardi Gras demonstrates the merging of the local and the global. Markwell contributes to this idea of the localization-globalization dynamic of Mardi Gras as “the way in which a local, community event has challenged and over-turned social mores and legislation at the state and national levels partly through its elevation to a national and international event” (2002, p. 83).

Conclusion

Through the frameworks of tradition and postmodernism, it is possible to see how the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras demonstrates society’s struggle to maintain continuity with the past, which comes in conflict with the vast changes occurring as we look to the future. The difficulty to retain a sense of tradition amidst an ever-changing and advancing world is exemplified through Mardi Gras’s endeavours to maintain the original community-based message of the festival with the powerful forces of globalisation, tourism, commercialism and simulation. The power of corporations has evidently changed the aesthetic of the festival however traditions must also allow themselves to be altered and evolve over time (Giddens 1999). In order to understand the present moment we live in, it is vital that we come to terms with these changes which are occurring rapidly within our society today, so that we may use that knowledge to better secure our connections with the past. However as Hobsbawm stated, “it is the appearance and establishment [of invented traditions] rather than their chances of survival which are [the] primary concern” (Hobsbawm 1993, p. 1).

Notes on Contributor

Eloise Flanagan studies Media Arts and Production at the University of Technology Sydney.

References

- Carbery, G. 1995, A History of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, The Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Australia.
- Giddens, A. 1999, Tradition, viewed 10 April 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/events/reith_99/week3/week3.htm>

- Gotham, K.F. 2007, 'Contrasts of Carnival Mardi Gras Between the Modern and the Postmodern', PhD thesis, Tulane University, New Orleans, viewed 1 April 2012, <<http://www.tulane.edu/~kgotham/Papers/Contrasts%20of%20Carnival.pdf>>
- Gross, D. 1992, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and Critique of Modernity*, The University of Massachusetts Press, United States of America.
- Hobsbawm, E. 1993, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 1-14.
- Holtorf, C. 1998, *The Invention of Tradition*, viewed 15 April 2012, <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd/holtorf/6.3.html>>
- Lyotard, J.F. 1997, 'The Postmodern Condition', in K.Jenkins (ed), *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London, pp. 36-38.
- Malpas, S. 2005, *The Postmodern*, Routledge, London, pp.11-17 & 31-36.
- Markwell, K. 2002, 'Mardi Gras Tourism and the Construction of Sydney as an International Gay and Lesbian City', Project Muse, vol. 8, pp. 81-99.
- Morley, D. 1996, 'Postmodernism: The Rough Guide', in J. Curran, D. Morley, V. Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, 2012, *History*, viewed 29 March 2012, <<http://www.mardigras.org.au/about-us/history/index.cfm>>
- Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, 2012, *New Mardi Gras Annual Report 2011*, viewed 14 May 2012 <http://www.mardigras.org.au/storage/documents/nmg_ar201011c.pdf.pdf>
- Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, 2012, *Partners*, viewed 15 May 2012, <<http://www.mardigras.org.au/partners/index.cfm>>
- Walkerdine (eds.), 2nd edn, Arnold, London, pp. 50-65.
- Waterman, S. 1998, 'Carnivals for Elites? The Cultural Politics of Arts Festivals ', Sage Journals, pp. 54-74.