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ABSTRACT -

This paper unravels the types of relationships people have with their gardens. This is achieved through a review of previous literature on the topic, coupled with a theoretical contextualisation which utilises postmodern concepts, notably that of Jameson's 'nostalgic return' (1989). To illustrate the relevance of these concepts to an understanding of gardening the paper turns to a number of gardening 'texts' and 'spaces' to decipher the ways in which gardens are consumed within contemporary culture. It argues that representations of gardens cohere around two key motifs: the search for paradise and the imagined return to a long-forgotten past.

INTRODUCTION

The statement that gardens are in vogue is an oft-made one in the UK. By some accounts, gardening has become the 'new sex' (Bhatti and Church 2000; Maltby 2001) as testified by the popularity of garden makeover programmes (Taylor 2002), the most notable being *Ground Force*. Market research reports suggest that gardening represents the number one hobby in the UK (Mintel 1997) and that the total market for gardening products had reached a value of ,3.35 billion by 2000, an increase of 70 billion since 1996 (see Taylor 2002).

This paper discusses the contemporary way in which the practice of gardening appears to be constructed and enjoyed. To do this, the paper begins with a contextual discussion of postmodern conditions, where the emphasis is placed upon understanding the consumer and their modes of consumption. This leads to a question: 'what form does our contemporary enjoyment of gardening appear to be taking?' To answer this question two illustrations are provided. First, the view offered in UK and US gardening 'textbooks' where the emphasis is placed on providing a philosophy of everyday life within consumer culture. Second, the search for meaning from the sites or places of gardening consumption, one such 'spectacle' (Debord 1976) or 'site of cultural consumption' (Chevalier 1998) is the Chelsea Flower Show, an annual exhibition of all that is 'contemporary' in UK gardening.

POSTMODERNITY, NOSTALGIA AND PARADISE

"Why do we need the concept of postmodernity?" was a rhetorical device employed by Bauman (1988) to question the value and significance of this concept for an understanding of contemporary culture. In response he argued that its main basis for legitimation lies in its ability to "theorize different aspects of contemporary experience, or theorize them in a different way" (1988, p.217). Cue a discussion of gardening, and a detour into the range of concepts that come under the umbrella concept of postmodernism, for the insights they may offer for a contemporary reading of 'gardens'. For help, Thomas (1997), working on the basis of Firat and Venkatesh's (1993; 1995) framework argues that the 'essential characteristics' of postmodernism are those of fragmentation, de-differentiation, hyperreality, pastiche and anti-foundationalism. In this manner, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue that the postmodern conditions which serve to explicate the situation of the consumer 'most' are those of fragmentation and decentredness. Once more Thomas (1997) comes to the rescue with his suggestion that "Consumers live in a world of doubt, ambiguity and uncertainty." (1997, p.58). In this context, one route for an 'escape attempt' (Cohen and Taylor 1976) may be to revert to the safety and security of the past (Brown 1999; Goulding 2000); eras which were less problematic than that of our own (Foster 1989). Jameson (1989) originally spotlighted this desire for a 'nostalgic return' in the films of the 1970s; Brown (1999) in the world of advertising and the craze for retro products; and Goulding (2000) in the historical representations provided at heritage attractions. Hence our shift to the world of gardening and its representations of the past, coupled with the offer of a 'paradise' or 'sanctuary' free of the ambiguity and uncertainty of contemporary times; or as Jameson concluded on the wish to experience and "return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again." (1989, p.116). The argument that marketing is bound up with our notions of paradise is evident in current work (Brown and Patterson 2000) which suggests that advertising is often employed to sell 'dreams', with one such dream being the recourse to nostalgia (Wernick 1997).

THINGS TO DO WITH GARDENS

Research on gardens has similarly emphasised the role and significance of these spaces to contemporary living. For example, the argument that gardens represent a significant feature of people's lives can be found in a number of early studies (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Francis 1993). Dunnett and Qasim (2000) in their more recent quantitative study on the social meaning and values derived

from gardening make the link between gardening and human well-being. They found a clear relationship between time spent in the garden and age, but also sought to explore some of the enjoyment that people derive from their gardens. Some important factors in this respect were the creation of a pleasant environment and promotion of relaxation, but also having a 'neat and tidy' garden, health value of fresh air and exercise, meeting and talking with neighbours and fruit and vegetable production. In addition, a number of respondents valued the garden as a sphere of creativity and self-expression, a factor that was especially important for professional people in 35-55 age groups. In explaining this desire to garden, Dunnett and Qasim suggest:

"Gardens were viewed as a necessary relief and contrast to the hard elements of the built environment of the city. Garden wildlife was almost universally welcomed. Some gardeners attributed religious or spiritual associations to their gardens." (2000, p.44, italics added)

They go on to conclude, that:

"It is clear that the value of gardens to the people who use them goes far beyond pure utilitarian uses. The garden also has considerable emotional, psychological, healing and even spiritual values for many people." (2000, p.45).

Moreover, the notion that gardens may represent an 'escape attempt' in the fashion of Cohen and Taylor (1976), from the questions and doubts of contemporary living demands further attention. A number of previous studies have made the link between gardening and the search for paradise. Cooper-Marcus (1993) suggests that the then resurgence in the popularity of gardening could be attributed to a reaction to modern technology. In his definition of gardening, he seeks to explore the question of why people may choose to garden:

"We garden because that activity requires knowledge and intuition, science and nurturance, planning and faith. We create gardens because, at some barely discernible level of consciousness, it is one way to reconnect with that mythical Garden of Eden or oasis of Shambhala." (1993, p.27, italics added).

Chevalier (1998) uses the concept of 'appropriation' within her study to examine people as what she terms 'creative appropriators'. She focused on thirty households living on the Jersey Farm estate near St Albans, United Kingdom, and in explaining their practices she draws a distinction between how people choose to appropriate

or use two contrasting gardening spaces, that of the 'back' garden versus the 'front' garden:

"The front garden acts as the presentation of the household, an identity marker in the absence of any other sign...In Jersey Farm, thanks to the front garden, the visitor could also collect some information, but in this case on the social integration of the residents through the similarity of their garden and those of their neighbours." (1998, p.49)

She continues by explaining how this 'front' garden differs from the notion of the 'back' garden:

"The 'back garden', more or less protected from outside views by fences, is a private/public space as is the lounge, in opposition to the front garden, which is a public/private space. Only a few authorized persons can enter the back garden. This space expresses the individual and familial identity of the owner through a sense of being 'at home'." (1998, p.49)

This focus upon the distinctions apparent in people's use of space, can also be gleaned from an ethnographic research, Chapman and Jamal (1997) discuss the contrast between the meaning and use of gardens in semi-detached versus terraced housing. They contend that in terraced housing:

"The front garden (often very small, perhaps only a yard or so in width) was a celebration of ornamental non-functionality, as befitted its opposition to the routine of the back yard and back entrance...The front garden was a place for fantasies of rockery in quartz, for flowers and shrubs, and for careful display of propriety and cleanliness." (1997, p.7).

Whereas in semi-detached housing:

"Each dwelling was surrounded on three of its sides by land, air, garden. The toilet, by this time, had moved indoors, so that the sense of 'back-yard' (containing toilet) was lost; all the garden was influenced by the proprieties of the 'front' garden; in a sense, the 'front garden' of the older style terrace now spread all around the house. The garden, more or less elaborate, was a showcase for tidiness, display, neatness; flowers and shrubs were grown, lawns carefully tended." (ibid, p.7)

The garden then can be read as what Chapman and Jamal define as "a publicly visible metaphor for the interior of the house." (1997, p.8). This focus can also be found in the early work of Young and Wilmott (1990, originally 1957) who discuss the movement of

people from the East End of London to Bethnal Green: "A nice house and shabby clothes, a neat garden and an old box of a pram, do not go together." (1990, p.157). In explaining this Young and Willmott argue that "People struggle to raise their all-round standards to those of the home, and in the course of doing so, they look for guidance to their neighbours. To begin with, the first-comers have to make their own way. The later arrivals have their model at hand. The neighbours have put up nice curtains. Have we? They have got their garden planted with privet and new grass-seed. Have we?" (1990, p.159). So that what is generated is a process whereby the "norms of the estate" are manufactured and reproduced.

So when we start to analyse the act of gardening we are immediately faced with a contradiction, that at one level gardening appears to offer people a creative sphere, but at another it displays not freedom but aspects of social conformity.

LOOKING TO GARDENING TEXTS

The notion of gardens as constituting some form of 'paradise' (Cooper-Marcus 1993) can be traced through previous research on the topic, but to extend our discussion it is useful to turn to gardening 'texts' which echo many of these themes but serve to illustrate how gardens may be consumed in contemporary culture. To extend this discussion two gardening 'textbooks', the first published in Britain and the second published in America, are spotlighted to reveal the representations of the kinds of relationships people may have with this socially-constructed space called the 'garden'. The first is Geoff Hamilton's *Paradise Gardens* (1997). The review of the book, to be found on the backcover, suggests:

"Our gardens have always been sanctuaries, private places to escape from the pressures of the outside world. Now with Geoff Hamilton's infallible advice, you can transform your own garden into a little piece of paradise on earth." (1997)

The text then becomes akin to a guide, with Hamilton spelling out his philosophy of how this search can be achieved. He continues by stating:

"If asked to define our own idea of a personal paradise, I think most of us would visualize rolling green hills, shady trees and flower studded meadows, all orchestrated with the song of birds and the buzzing of insects: in other words, the countryside. In reality, few of us have the good fortune to live in this kind of Arcadian situation,

but we still yearn for the beauty and simplicity of a life lived close to nature." (ibid, 1997, p.8)

In legitimating the idea of the search, Hamilton contrasts the world of the garden to his vision of contemporary consumer culture:

"...I'm convinced that we all need some kind of escape from the complexity, the pressure and the ever-accelerating speed of modern life, a life just about as far removed from the one for which our minds and bodies were originally designed as it's possible to get. I'm certain too that most of us are desperate for a philosophy that counters our current passion for materialism and the shallow values of 'sophisticated society'. (ibid, 1997, p.8).

Gardening through this reading can be understood as providing a defence from the 'sublime' (Kover 1998). A suggestion which serves to illustrate the contemporary consumption of gardening, or as Chapman and Jamal (1997) remark:

"The garden...has an entire cosmology of urban and industrial life built into its rockeries, an entire historiography of modernity growing out of its flower-beds." (1997, p.7).

For Hamilton, the garden then becomes a panacea to the ills of contemporary consumer culture, a culture encapsulated by: "constant noise, traffic, shopping malls, canned entertainment, muzac, low-flying aircraft, intrusive neighbours and all the horrors of modern existence" (Hamilton 1997, p.9). Hamilton then contrasts this contemporary environment with that of medieval times, when as he suggests "chaos reigned and life was fraught with danger" (ibid, 1997, p.15). In response he suggests medieval gardeners developed the concept of 'hortus conclusus', that is a "quiet garden enclosed on all sides and symbolizing protection from the outside world. It was intended to produce what was then a rare feeling of security and peace." (ibid, 1997, p.15).

His book therefore becomes a 'guide' to ways to 'escape' the contemporary postmodern predicament of fragmentation and decentredness (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In this manner he argues that gardens should provide us with "time to think" but also a "controlled situation" where an individual can "get your hands into the soil" (Hamilton 1997, p.19). Essential to his approach to the garden and the activity of gardening is the concept of gardening as a space for temporary relief:

"...don't underestimate the therapeutic value of gardening. It's the one area I know where we can all use our nascent creative talents to make a truly satisfying work of art. Every individual, with

thought, patience and a large portion of help from nature, has it in them to create their own private paradise: truly a thing of beauty and a joy for ever." (ibid, 1997, p.19)

Hamilton starts to touch upon the search for meaning that may be experienced by individuals in postmodern times. Themes which are mirrored in the second 'text' that I would like to discuss, a book entitled *The Inward Garden: Creating a Place of Beauty and Meaning* (1995) by Julie Moir Messervy. Even from the title, the search for 'meaning' or value is paramount, the book predates the Hamilton book by two years, and was published in America rather than Britain, but appears to share a number of central preoccupations. Messervy (1995) begins her exploration of the relationship between people and gardens with the following lines:

"Deep within each of us lies a garden. An intensely personal place, this landscape grows from a rich blend of ingredients—imagination, memory, character, and dreams—that combine in wonderful ways in our innermost selves." (Messervy, 1995, p.11).

She continues by suggesting:

"Your inward garden lies in your imagination; your outward garden lies upon your land—a private landscape for wondering, for dancing, for daydreaming. Both gardens represent your personal paradise—a beautiful place designed specifically to capture the most positive and refreshing landscape memories; a place that is both a sanctuary from the stress of everyday life and a place of rejuvenation; a place available to you at all times." (ibid, 1995, p.11).

Messervy therefore echoes a number of themes prevalent in the work of Hamilton, especially the notion of a garden as constituting some form of "sanctuary". A "sanctuary" ever more important given her perception on the nature of everyday life:

"A garden can also be a place of refuge—a sanctuary from the everyday world. After a long day's work, we race through the garden gate, leaving behind daily stresses and strains, to tend to our garden's (and our own) needs: watering its flowers, cutting its grasses, breathing in its fragrances, all the while contemplating and dreaming. When we lose ourselves in the care of a garden we cherish spending time alone." (ibid, 1995, p.20, italics added)

The emphasis on what Brownlie and Horne term 'consumption dreaming' (2000) is thus apparent, when Messervy argues:

"I have found through years of practice, that people garden in order to make something grow; to interact with nature; to stare, to find sanctuary, to heal, to honor the earth, to leave a mark. Through gardening, we feel whole as we make our personal work of art upon our land." (ibid, 1995, p. 19)

So here Messervy directly explores the question of the dialectic between people and nature:

"For many of us, a garden is also one of the few places to experience the demands of the natural world. However formally it is laid out, however unnatural its features may appear, the garden is still the place where we must reckon with our limitations in controlling the forces of nature." (ibid, 1995, p.19).

This focus on the agency of individuals in the context of the relationship between people and nature is similarly explored through the 'taming' of nature at Flower Shows. Where the effort is to create a 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard 1989) of gardening through a representation of the garden space, a hyperreality or facade which is achieved at huge expense.

LOOKING TO GARDENING SPECTACLES: CHELSEA, 2002

This focus upon the concept of gardening and gardens as a paradisiacal space can also be traced in terms of recent representations of gardens found at flower shows. But the logic is very different as these gardens are constructed as very costly (many with price tags of over ,100,000) and temporary facades (the event lasts for only five days). The Chelsea Flower Show is an annual event hosted by the Royal Horticultural Society and held in London during May. More than a 'lower show' the event receives thousands of visitors and blanket television and radio coverage from the BBC throughout the five days of its duration. The show can therefore be perceived as a particular site of consumption (Chevalier 1998), a 'spectacle' in the gardening calendar. At the heart of the show are the recreations of gardens that are displayed.

My story begins with three of the gardens at the show, which all received significant television coverage and were eventually awarded Royal Horticultural Society gold medals. The three gardens were the 'Sanctuary', 'Tearmann si' (translated as 'A Celtic Sanctuary'), and 'Garden Open'. It is argued that all three of the gardens echo many of the concerns evident in the gardening textbooks, but also the postmodern concern over the contemporary position of consumers and the ways in which they may try to 'escape' the dilemmas of uncertainty and ambiguity through representations of the past.

The first garden was sponsored by Merrill Lynch Investment Managers and designed by Stephen Woodhams, as stated, it received a lucrative RHS Gold Medal, the description of the garden reveals:

"The Sanctuary Garden is designed to be a tranquil and protected environment, providing a place to relax and revitalise away from the stresses of daily life." (www.rhs.org.uk)

Echoes here then of the representation of the garden as 'other' to contemporary culture, in much the same fashion of Hamilton and Messervy, a world free of the stresses and strains of contemporary living.

The second garden was designed by Mary Reynolds, a young Irish garden designer who showcased at Chelsea for the first time in 2002, titled 'A Celtic Sanctuary' we are told that it was inspired by the Wicklow Countryside in Irish Mythology, once again the garden won an RHS gold medal. The description of the garden reads:

"A circular stone moon gate arches over a pre-roman style split bough path planted with primroses, cowslips and speedwell. This leads to the inner circle where the elements of air, fire and water combine. The circle is flooded with still water crossed only by a path of stepping stones. Out of the center of the water rises a stone fire bowl watched over by granite thrones placed on an axis representing the four points of the compass." (www.rhs.org.uk)

The garden expresses a contrasting relationship with nature to previous Chelsea gardens where the aesthetic has been one of modernism. For 'Tearmann Si' the aim appears to represent a mythological garden where the focus is upon natural planting and attempting to 'recreate' through a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1989), rather than 'tame' nature. The description continues:

"Enclosing the garden will be a traditional dry stone wall built from Wicklow Granite. The wall will be planted with native Irish plants such as wall pennywort, yarrow, thrift, heart's tongue fern, maiden hair spleenwort, wild strawberry, cranesbill, St John's wort, sweet violet, self-heal, common pennywort and woodruff." (www.rhs.org.uk)

Part of the aesthetic for these gardens appears to be a changing relationship with nature but also with the past. Here it is useful to return to the classic texts of postmodern culture and Jameson's notion of 'pastiche' where he suggests that:

"...in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum...imprison(ed) in the past." (1989, p.115-116)

This desire is perhaps best seen in the third garden which I would like to spotlight Roger Latts' 'Garden Open'. This garden was awarded the illustrious 'Best in Show' award and an RHS Gold medal. The description to the garden on the RHS website reads:

"Part of the garden will look as if it has been refurbished by the owner in preparation for NGS visitors. This richly planted area will be based around a series of pergolas weighed down with climbers and an oak framed summerhouse." (www.rhs.org.uk)

Through this description the emphasis is upon how the past can be re-represented:

"The other area of the garden will be wild, overgrown and walled featuring a tumbledown greenhouse and neglected cold frames dating back to 1927 a lawnmower and other bits of garden paraphernalia from that era will add a nostalgic feel, and create enormous contrast with the well-tended part of the garden adjacent to it." (www.rhs.org.uk)

So here the explicit reference to the postmodern condition of nostalgia is made apparent, but it is a very different form of representation to that of Mary Reynolds' recourse to Irish mythology:

"The planting will be of a very Traditional English country style with an abundance of rambling roses and colourful perennials supported by solid evergreen shrubs such as Cistus, Hebe, myrtle, Photinia, Bupleurum, box and yew." (www.rhs.org.uk)

Three representations for the garden of the future which have their feet firmly embedded in the past, from that of a sanctuary, to 'old' England of the 1930s or a return to mythological Ireland and the rural idyll. And they are perhaps best made sense of through Baudrillard's eyes, and his characterisation of the postmodern outlook: "...a universe where there are no more definitions possible...It has all been done...It has deconstructed its entire universe. So that all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces that is postmodern." (cited by Best and Kellner, 1991, p.128). The representations of gardens can thus be understood as such 'pieces' with which people play to assure ourselves of the value and meaning of contemporary living.

ROUND-UP

This paper has modest ambitions, taking a cue largely from Bauman (1988), and his questioning of the value of postmodernism. Postmodernism it is suggested provides the tools to theorize previously neglected consumer experiences (Featherstone, 1991; Kover, 1998), one such activity being that of gardening. In using this lens of postmodern conditions an explanation is provided for why activities such as gardening have become shrouded in the language of philosophies of everyday life, as arenas through which 'escape attempts' may be imagined in cultural contexts such as the UK. Escape attempts that are rooted in the notion of garden spaces as forming a paradise or sanctuary from contemporary social life, and one form that this may take is the desire to return to more 'peaceful' and 'tranquil' times. The paper opens up to consumer inquiry the issue of how gardens are consumed in the 21st century. This is especially so, in the light of the popularity of garden makeover programmes where the garden represents a key lifestyle statement (Taylor 2002) and where the promise appears to be one of have your paradise without the hassle of exerting physical energy. The paper therefore has at its heart the following ethos, expressed by Vita Sackville-West in the 1940s, which I offer as a punctuation mark to the discussion,

"Small pleasures must correct great tragedies,

Therefore of gardens in the midst of war

I boldly tell." (Sackville-West, 1946, p. 13).

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