

The moments that last: some reflections from the SPRG Summer School

September 2011, Janine Morley

The SPRG Summer School packed a diverse menu of activities and discussion into half a week; so much so that I imagine each attendee found something different to savour and digest. In my case, I'm still chewing over some thoughts about time and the relationship between practices and consumption. This came out of a short, simple but hugely interesting group exercise on the streets of Manchester observing (un)sustainable eating and drinking practices. There, we witnessed the familiar urban doings, things, infrastructures, interventions and environmental left-overs of "fast food". The clue was in the name, of course, but it took some handy concepts and some photographic evidence to put "time" clearly in the frame. Ironically, we didn't quite manage this in time for our presentation, but I slowly came to see in the observations and ideas a tale of unsustainability that pivoted on the epic incongruity in the time-scales of the various elements that are integrated in this mode of eating and drinking.

Following a talk from Ted Schatzki on the understanding of large social phenomena, we went out to "where the action is" to observe and understand the necessary "nitty gritty details" taking in our tool-box, the concept of a practice: an organised nexus of doings and sayings, that is bundled together with the material arrangements that are essential to it but nevertheless distinct. Although this distinction is not common to all theories of practice, I think it may be a useful one: it certainly helped me to realise there was a potentially significant disconnect between the time horizons of a practice and the material arrangements that are essential to it.

Out on Oxford Road, we observed *fast* doings: eating and drinking which required almost no dedicated time from the practitioner and none to prepare or clean up. We saw that bottles of water, crisps and sandwiches could be obtained very quickly from the many outlets along the street and we saw that such things were consumed as people walked along; we also saw the left-over materials that had been put down en route. In a way that makes sense to the practitioners, I suspect these observations roughly capture the boundaries of what are undoubtedly *fast* food and drink practices. But the evidence was clear to any broader glance that there was something much more enduring about the organisation of these bounded and brief practices. The associated materials and infrastructures of provision and removal were pervasive in this part of Manchester. And they indicated the massively unbalanced and largely invisible scale of non-practitioner time that is necessary to make such momentary practices possible. This extended time-scale, I would suggest, is a distinctive feature of the bundled or associated material arrangements. It is signalled in the ancient oil combusting in the generator, which we noticed outside a mobile jacket potato stall, and in the fact that the shops were fully stocked and the street was not entirely fringed with litter. Although the practices of eating and drinking "fast food" are brief, the material arrangements of "fast food" are anything but fast: they evidently extend before and after any single performance not only in human time but also in the unobservably long, fossil time of carbon.

In this view and if consumption can be defined as the use of resources, most of the consumption that is essential to the practice, and its tale of unsustainability, actually resides in the temporally and spatially extensive material arrangements that are bundled with it. Yet, regardless where conceptual boundaries between materials and practices are ultimately drawn, I think this helps to highlight, more broadly, that consumption itself can be much more expansive in time than the organised doing that it supports, and remains essential to. How to reconcile this with Alan Warde's (2005) contention, discussed earlier the same day, that "consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice". Could it (also) be that a practice is a moment in almost every consumption?