‘Coldfeet Café’: a Mundane Consumption Experience (While It Lasts?)

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This study investigates the processes of transformation and cultural negotiation of mundane consumption phenomena. By analyzing the cultural experience of consumption at the “pølsevogn” – the humble and inconspicuous open air (mobile) hot dog stand typical in Danish street scene, also nicknamed “coldfeet café”. The pølsevogn is arguably a cultural institution in its own right in spite of – or given Danish cultural values maybe because of - its unpretentiousness. We aim to shed light on the specific dynamics and processes at play in case of a food cultural institution situated in the tension of (maintaining) “mundaneness” in the face of an emergent cultural role as a staged nostalgic experience.

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spaces created with the creativity and touch of single entrepreneurs meet consumers’ needs for authenticity, simplicity and stability. According to our data, time does not appear to erase significant experiences in ordinary commercial locations from consumers’ memories. Nonetheless, important changes in individuals’ lives (moving to a new home, a new job, divorces, etc.) may interrupt the relationship. Consumers may also find stores which are more suitable for satisfying new needs and desires. In these cases, however, mundane places visited regularly for long time in the past provide food for personal memories and prompt comparisons of new with old. Their stock of precious recollections facilitates both social interaction with other visitors and personal assessment on life projects in these new settings. When people look back over their lives, they tend to recollect memories about the stores or places they used to attend, even though they are no more considered as favorite places.

In analyzing the dynamics of sense of place and attachment beyond these stories, we reveal how separation from locations to which consumers feel very close is a necessary step for identity evolution. When consumers realize the constructive function that these locations have played in their pasts, they attribute to them a new function. In personal memories, the mundane places where consumers have spent much time, regularly and in a smooth and natural way, assume a role of identity markers, spaces which indicate a personal evolution. This detachment gives rise to a new dignity attributed to these places, whose significance is heightened precisely because they no longer contribute to the individual’s dignity attributed to these places, whose significance is heightened because they no longer contribute to the individual’s present identity. The sense of place of commercial locations resides in this seeming paradox. The dialectic between attachment to and detachment from ordinary places is a major component of the process of identity construction; it is a path or journey from one personal space to the next (Casey 1993) or, better, from one commercial location to the next.

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“The everyday is platitudinous; but this banality is also what is most important” wrote Maurice Blanchot (1987). Inconspicuous consumption experiences often belong in the doxa category of consumer practices, generally neither particularly loved or hated by consumers but accepted in their taken-for-grantedness (Wilk 1997). As such, they provide mundane experiences that are outside the experience economy but nevertheless often constitutive for non-reflexive feelings of identification and attachment. This study analyzes the cultural experience of consumption at the “pølsevogn”–the humble and inconspicuous open air (mobile) hot dog stand typical in Danish street scene, also nicknamed the “coldfeet café”; an ambivalent designation referring not without affection to the café-like community and coziness that may emerge among its customers and the owner of the establishment as well as to the inconveniences of this primitive, outdoor fast food outlet.

Consuming at the pølsevogn is a classical urban food ritual dating back to 1921 when the first mobile hot-dog stands were allowed in Denmark (Thomsen 1995). At the culmination of its penetration in the 1970s, it had become a highly present part of the Danish “foodie cityscapes,” the ubiquity of food availability in contemporary urban environments (Bell and Valentine 1997). As such, it is an authentic food experience which does only partially lend itself to Groves’ (2001) description of authentic foods as “something apart from daily routines” and as something which contains artisanal qualities in the production process. Granted, few people eat every day at the coldfeet café, but there is nothing exceptional in terms of artisanal or gastronomic qualities about the menu. Thus, the pølsevogn challenges this widespread image of authentic food seemingly constituted by a creative class and its romanticized picture of authenticity. This consumer experience is basically classless: people of all social backgrounds can and will go there–often or occasionally. In all its mundane simplicity, it is a widespread traditional routine and a convenience solution rather than a ritual (Marshall 2005) although, as we shall see, this might be changing.

The doxa character of the pølsevogn, i.e. its inconspicuous authenticity positions it simultaneously as something quintessentially Danish and something absent from the formulation of a national canon of food cultural icons. An illustrous example is the fact that since a few years now, the first thing one sees when arriving in the baggage claim area in the Copenhagen airport is an adapted version (fixed, not mobile stall) of the pølsevogn. Homeliness is instant. As such, the pølsevogn and its offerings in spite of its mundane character is clearly a part of a food-nation identification scheme (Bell and Valentine 1997).

The pølsevogn for quite some time held a large proportion of the market share in the Danish fast food market. As such, its history is akin to the one of Jolly Cola, a local cola brand that had a major market share in the Danish cola market until the (inevitable?) take-over by the American giants (Askegaard and Csaba 2000) In fact, when the hamburger culture first entered Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s, it did so through the medium of the pølsevogn through an addition to its standard range of products: the Beef steak sandwich, which was (and is) a burger stripped of its salad and other fresh greens and served with the standard ornamentation from the pølsevogn, its sauces, fried onions, cucumber salad, beet roots and gravy. Only later, did the global burger chains per se enter the Danish market.

The increased competition may be a significant part of the explanation why the number of pølsevogne has fallen drastically over the last decades (Thomsen 1995). Certain voices in popular media have raised concern that they are gradually disappearing from the cityscape, being replaced by more comfortable (and occasionally also healthier) alternatives of fast food consumption. This reflects a sparse but growing reflexivity on the significance of this part of the Danish cityscape/food culture and mobilized forces for its rescue. The pølsevogn has for example become incorporated in large family celebrations (silver anniversaries, 60th birthday parties etc.) as an alternative to the “go-home” meal usually served at the end of such parties by way of a “hire-a-pølsevogn” marketplace service. In such instances the pølsevogn emerges as an extraordinary food experience. The purpose of this paper is to seize the moment and analyze this mundane consumption experience confronted with “the threat of authentification” by which it becomes part of a cultural canon of national heritage, and thereafter disappears out of the mundane, non-reflexive universe of experiences. The present indications of the reflexive stance to the pølsevogn and its role as an institution for mundane consumer practices presents an interesting opportunity to empirically follow the actual discursive and practical transformation processes of a food cultural institution caught in the tension of being defined in iconic or indexical forms of authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004). We are thus interested in the process of emerging reflexivity and “musealization” in a subpopulation of high cultural capital consumers and the extent to which media coverage of this reflexivity changes the perspective of ordinary consumers.

Data collection for this project includes videographic as well as interview-based and observational data. From the data are emerging indications of both a non-reflexive as well as a reflexive stance...
on the pølsevogn experience, reflection the distinction between two types of food consumers also proposed by Askegaard and Kjeldgaard (2007). The data collection spans the whole Denmark geographically and is ongoing; the scheduled completion is in late spring 2010, so that we can sustain our theoretical reflections with fresh data at the time of the European ACR conference.

To summarize, this project aims at investigating the transformation processes and associated cultural tensions of the definition of a traditionally mundane food cultural institution. Furthermore, it is part of an ongoing and more general search for a “Nordic consumer culture” (Kjeldgaard, Östberg, and Askegaard 2007) as a response to Cova’s suggestion of a Mediterranean marketing and consumer culture (Cova 2005).

REFERENCES


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