A Gastronomic Meditation: On McDonald’s

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my daughter Kate.

I hope food helps bring you a life filled with significant pleasure and provides you a constructive vehicle for an examined existence.
Acknowledgements

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All those who have participated in the Australian Symposium of Gastronomy and the Research Centre for History of Food and Drink, Adelaide University. Both have been valuable forums for the serious and pleasurable discussion of food.

This thesis is offered, in the spirit of Rabelais, ‘to drinkers of wine rather than oil’.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Colin James Sheringham
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Abstract

The thesis offers a gastronomic meditation on the ambiguity and complexity of meanings signified by McDonald’s as one of the most powerful food symbols of the late twentieth-century Western society. Using an advance on the structuralist perspective, the thesis argues that it is important to understand food not simply as a surface representation of the social order but as a product of a constant, constitutive dialectic between order and disorder and a dual perception of order. The search for the complex meanings of McDonald’s is pursued firstly by bringing the concept of disorder to centre stage to form a dialectic relationship between order and disorder; secondly, by setting McDonald’s at the interface of modernity and post modernity, positioned in an intersection of two competing versions of the history of food and of order as expressed through food. Here the dominant historical narrative expresses the triumph of the order of the bourgeoisie through the work of Elias and ‘the civilizing process’, with the counter-narrative of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque highlighting the continuing importance of disorder. These narratives are explored at two key moments of food history, where the order/disorder dialectic can be seen to play a different role. The first is the interface of medieval ‘disorder’ and the coming bourgeois order of modernity, where Rabelais is the key text and secondly; the early nineteenth-century, where Brillat-Savarin is used as a marker of the triumph of eighteenth-century rationalism. It is only by reference to the order/disorder dialectic and the duality of order that the ambiguity of complex food symbols such as McDonald’s can be better understood, and thus become, importantly, a meditation on the nature of society in the pursuit of an examined existence.
Preface

‘Man does not live by bread alone’.

Human culture is about conquering nature and how we culturally engage in differentiating ourselves from ‘others’. In Western society, bread has been traditionally used to symbolise the ways that this feat of cultural distinction has been achieved. Bread can be read as a culinary symbol for how society has been structured to conquer nature, a sign for the prevailing social order. However, in the late twentieth century, one company was seen to dramatically change how Western society ate. McDonald’s symbolically took bread and inserted their ‘two all-beef patties special sauce lettuce cheese onions pickles’ into sesame seed-coated buns and produced a food that came to signify a new form of social order in the Western world. McDonald’s and their hamburger had become one of the most powerful culinary symbols of the late twentieth century.

What then would the eighteenth-century French gastronomer Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 13), who famously proclaimed “Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are”, make of McDonald’s and their hamburgers? What would a meditation on McDonald’s reveal to Brillat-Savarin of the individual consumer and the society in which s/he live? The thesis takes up the ‘spirit’ of this challenge and offers a gastronomic meditation on the ambiguity and complexity of meanings signified by McDonald’s.

The importance of McDonald’s in the modern gastronomic landscape is beyond question. No other restaurant in history has achieved the level of social prominence that has been realized by McDonald’s. McDonald’s have built a chain of fast food restaurants that has been so successful that, globally, McDonald’s as a social institution has become a familiar part of the everyday. This universality and its distinction as the largest restaurant chain have engendered McDonald’s as a powerful
sign, open to conflicting interpretations and therefore misunderstandings. McDonald’s is symbolically paradoxical, a symbol that expresses both order and disorder. Some interpret McDonald’s to offer more than just hamburgers: the McDonald’s experience is seen to hold out a symbolic promise of a superior world, a symbol equated with the triumph of late twentieth-century American capitalism. Eating at McDonald’s offers a means to embrace the order of modernity, a means ‘to eat a better world’.

Simultaneously, McDonald’s has also become a sign of all that is wrong with modernity and in particular Brand America. McDonald’s has been globally criticised, protested and even physically attacked. Hamburgers have become political. McDonald’s has become not only a sign of social order, but of disorder, an element of challenge to the traditional hegemony. Even a gastronomic slow moving snail was catalysed into action, promising an alternative to McDonald’s, a moral means ‘to eat a better world’.

To meditate on the meaning of McDonald’s requires recourse to the underlying assumption of Brillat-Savarin’s proclamation, that food can be read as a code, a form of language that communicates something of the individual and the collective. Brillat-Savarin understood that eating was not a simple biological act but one that was socially constructed. Food can be interpreted as a powerful symbolic expression of individual and collective identity. Understanding that food conveys meaning is significant but, as the thesis argues, understanding how that meaning is produced is also important in its own right. It is not enough to search for meaning in McDonald’s as a sign unless the search enables a deeper more reflective search on how meaning is produced and on the nature of existence. The thesis is structured to facilitate this search.

The preface serves as a menu, outlining the intention and explaining something of the flavour of the thesis. The thesis is then presented, divided into three sections. Part 1 comprises chapter 1, a return to the classics of structuralism to set the theoretical perspective. Using an advance on the structuralist perspective, the thesis argues that it is important to understand food not simply as a surface representation of the social order, but as a product of a constant, constitutive dialectic between order and
disorder and a dual perception of order. Part 2 comprises chapters 2 to 5, with these chapters providing a historical perspective in the form of two competing historical narratives of food. These narratives are then explored at two key moments of food history, where the order/disorder dialectic can be seen to play a different role. Part 3 comprises chapters 6 to 9. These chapters explore the ambiguous and complex meanings of McDonald’s, pursued firstly by using the dialectic relationship between order and disorder and the duality of order; secondly by setting McDonald’s at a third key moment of food history, the interface of modernity and post modernity, positioned in an intersection of the two competing historical narratives. The concluding thoughts provide a summation to the meditation.

To begin to explore the meanings of McDonald’s requires firstly a return to a fundamental question: why do we eat what we eat? Two broad theoretical perspectives emerge from the literature on food habits (Murcott, 1988, and Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo, 1992) to answer this question. These two theoretical approaches have been labelled ‘developmentalist’ and ‘structuralist’. The developmentalist perspective is concerned with understanding contemporary food habits through the examination of historical trends, the evolution of food habits and preferences. This approach is constrained by the subjective reporting of history, particularly when faced with examples of apparent conflicting and ambiguous behaviour.

The second approach, (which informs the thesis) is the structuralist perspective, an outlook that is sympathetic with the concepts underlying Brillat-Savarin’s proclamation and which draws upon the science of linguistics for inspiration by treating social manifestations as analogous to language. Food becomes understood as an elaborate method of communication, capable of conveying complex messages. Structuralism is concerned with taking observable or surface representations of culture, such as food habits, and decoding these to discover the deeper underlying structures of unconscious human thought that order our social phenomenon. Surface representations of culture, such as food habits, are treated as part of an elaborate classification system made up of signs and symbols. What is important to structuralists is the ‘order’, the consistent and coherent manner in which patterning of relationships between the elements occurs. As Brillat-Savarin seemingly appreciated,
food articulates something of the individual because it conveys meaning in a manner that is coherent and consistent with the deeper unconscious level that structures the system of classification. Structuralism offers a superior understanding when compared to the ‘developmentalist’ approach of ‘why we eat what we eat’, because it articulates that food is ordered by biology as well as thought of as part of a symbolically constructed system of cultural meanings.

Critics of the structuralist perspective, such as Mennell (1985, p. 6), appreciate some of the virtue of structuralism as “it recognises that ‘taste’ is culturally shaped and socially controlled”. Mennell argues however that structuralism is deficient because it tends towards a static view of the current social order, paying insignificant attention to the process of historical development. Structuralism seemingly does not explain why our food habits change. This static view offered by the structuralist perspective is a result of a focus on mapping what is known (order), that is, those elements that have been categorised within the classification system that represent the observed social order, the status quo.

The limitation noted by Mennell (1985) can be overcome by returning to the structuralist understanding of how the meaning of food is produced. The structuralist perspective can be advanced, the thesis will argue, if the primary concentration on ‘order’ can be ‘pushed’ to a perspective that makes much stronger use of structuralism’s existing theoretical account of ‘disorder’. It is only by bringing disorder right to centre stage that the richness, complexity and ambiguity of meaning that is signified by McDonald’s can be approached. The meanings articulated by food should not be understood as a simple reflection of the social order but can be more meaningfully comprehended as meaning articulated as a product of a continual and a constructive dialectic between order and disorder. This dialectic not only produces meaning, but can be used to explain how social change occurs as disorder continually informs order, pressuring order to change to incorporate the previously disordered into new forms of order.

From within a structuralist perspective these abstract concepts of ‘order’ and ‘disorder’ can be explained in a straightforward manner. Order can be viewed as what is known, understood and has been classified within a system of taxonomy. The
individual element’s affiliation is clearly understood in relationship to other elements in the system. Order is how we view and make sense of the world by using systems of classification, that once understood are not really questioned unless there is an element that challenges our notion of its fit within the system of order, an element that because of its ambiguity is thought to exhibit a level of ‘disorder’. This structure can lead disorder to be viewed as the opposite of order. This is an inaccurate view, however; disorder is in effect in a ‘central’ position between order and the chaos of the totally unknown. Disorder can be defined here as what is known, but which does not fit within the existing classification system of order. It is something ambivalent, calling order into question. The disordered element is neither obviously included nor excluded from the category of classification in question. Despite these bonds existing between the concepts, order and disorder are often understood as opposing polar values of a binary, rather than as binary values on a continuum that find their meaning from the relationship with their opposite label.

The ambiguity of classification associated with disorder produces an inherent sense of risk and danger to the system of order. Disorder can be perceived as a threat to hegemony because it challenges the existing concept of order and is thus pregnant with the potential to change the status quo. In response, order must deal with this perceived danger in a way that negates the risk to the status quo. This process of dealing with the risk creates the order/disorder dialectic catalysed by the properties of disorder to generate change. However, the basic need to remove the perceived threat of disorder serves to reinforce and maintain the central focus on the system’s existing order.

This way of viewing the concepts of order and disorder in absolute terms and the system of order’s attempted negation of disorder produces the static view of social order for which structuralism is criticised. It is only by reorienting to focus on the continual dialectic between order and disorder that structuralism can overcome its acknowledged limitations to better explain ambiguity and account for historical change.

While it is argued that the role of disorder is central to understanding the complexity and dynamic nature of the system of order, to date, the historical role of disorder has
been undervalued and marginalised. Disorder is particularly underrated in the current Western paradigm that is dominated by a historical narrative that charts the slow triumph of the bourgeoisie and their ‘civilising process’. This history is characterised by its focus on the perceived benefits obtained by subservience to a growing rationalisation of order driven by a desire for a general increase in the safety and predictability of life. While the focus of the dominant historical narrative is on order, a second and simultaneous historical narrative must be allowed to emerge as a counter narrative to the dominant narrative. This is a counter narrative that takes as its central focus not order but the positive regenerative nature of disorder. By simultaneously recognising these opposing but complementary histories, a duality of order emerges in relation to the hegemonic perspective: either a top-down imposing of order, or a bottom-up resistance based upon an embrace of disorder. In each case the order/disorder dialectic can be seen to play a different historical role. It is only when ‘pushed’ to account for disorder in these ways, as a central component of a longer history of the constant and constitutive order/disorder dialectic and duality of order, that the structuralist perspective becomes equipped not only to decode a complex social phenomenon such as McDonald’s, but also to examine how food produces meaning.

To address the need to incorporate a historical perspective, McDonald’s is positioned into a longer version of Western history by being sited at the intersection of the two competing histories and at the interface between modernity and post modernity. The dominant narrative sees McDonald’s as the exemplar of capitalism, a part of the history theorised by Elias (1994) that traces the slow rise and dominance of the bourgeoisie and its values system. This account leads inexorably to McDonald’s, the clean bright efficient restaurant, clearly representing the rationalisation of order and the triumph of the ‘civilising process’. This is also Ritzer’s (1993) McDonald’s, the signifier of a new McDonaldised social order, the triumph of American capitalism, and the success story of the hegemony catering to the mass market. However this top-down hegemonic understanding of McDonald’s is limited by its own perspective.

The counter narrative, which articulates an alternate history, must be acknowledged. Here McDonald’s can be viewed as a sign of disorder, a challenge to the hegemony. McDonald’s use of traditional elements of the carnivalesque, the clown, inversion,
excess, contributes to create a folk outlook consistent with that theorised by Bakhtin (1984). Viewed from this perspective McDonald’s can be interpreted as embracing disorder, a bottom-up folk challenge to the top-down order imposed by the hegemony. But this view is also limited in perspective, as exemplified by Bakhtin’s similarly narrow interpretation of only the carnivalesque aspect of Rabelais.

Rabelais offers more to the decoding of McDonald’s than Bakhtin extracted. Rabelais’ books abound with food and food imagery that are used as a secondary language to add richness to the text. Returning to the sixteenth century of Rabelais allows more than the incorporation of history into the analysis of McDonald’s. Rabelais represents a key moment in food history, the interface between medieval ‘disorder’ and the coming bourgeois order of modernity. Employing as just one of many literary devices the inherent ambiguity of food, Rabelais proceeds to create in his texts a jarring juxtaposition of the two versions of history, combining the normally separate outlooks of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, the serious and comic into one narrative, purposely creating a sense of ambiguity. Rabelais uses food as a literary device not only to create a sense of order but, importantly, to foreground disorder. Drawing on the inherent danger of disorder Rabelais, leads his readers to question their society. Rabelais uses food as a device that facilitates the weaving together of the competing narratives and a process of decoding, thus providing the reader a means to achieve a deeper understanding, an examined existence. By returning to the culinary in Rabelais, insight can be gained into how meaning is produced by the order/disorder dialectic and how the competing narratives function to inform the meanings of food symbols such as McDonald’s.

A second key moment in food history is the early nineteenth century, marked by Brillat-Savarin’s text on his ‘science’ of gastronomy, a representation of the triumph of eighteenth-century rationalism. In a similar vein to Rabelais, Brillat-Savarin provides a jarring juxtaposition; his gastronomy combines the normally separate perspectives symbolised by the mind/body binary. Gastronomy embraces not only the physical pleasure of eating but simultaneously the mental pleasure of thinking about food. Food is used by Brillat-Savarin as a vehicle to make people think, to be reflective. Brillat-Savarin combines the inherent ambiguity of food with the power of disorder, questioning the status quo of his society and holding out, via a gastronomic
practice, for the promise of eating a better world. This embrace of disorder remains a key aspect of the gastronomic tradition even today. Catalysed by the signifier McDonald’s and initially ordered as a binary opposite to McDonald’s, Brillat-Savarin’s perspective has been replaced by the Slow Food movement’s contemporary gastronomic call for a questioning of the existing social order.

The thesis can therefore be read simply, as a meditation on the complex and ambiguous meanings of McDonald’s as one of the most dominant food symbols of the order of Western society in the late twentieth century. The search for these meanings can be seen to move in two directions. The first emerges from the classics of the structuralist tradition. Rather than a focus on the meanings of food as a reflection of order, structuralism is pushed to accommodate a central role for disorder. The meanings of McDonald’s are examined by focusing upon the manner in which food produces meaning from a continual and a constructive dialectic between order and disorder. The second direction involves situating McDonald’s into a longer history of Western society, at the intersection of the two historical narratives in which the order/disorder dialectic is seen to play a different historical role. While the thesis does aim at decoding McDonald’s, it is also placed in the tradition of using the symbolic and ambiguous properties of food to examine society, to question the status quo and to embrace disorder as a means of pursuing an examined existence.
Part 1--Foundations

In the study of food and foodways, the structuralist tradition remains one of the most influential analytical perspectives that have been used for interpreting our food habits. The structuralist approach provides the necessary methodology that allows the meaning of and in food to be meditated upon. Within this thesis, the structuralist approach is fundamental to the task of analysing and decoding, as one of the most dominant food symbols of the late 20th century, the complex and ambiguous cultural phenomenon that is McDonald’s.

This section of the thesis returns to the classics of structuralism to explore the structuralist perspective of food as a means of communicating meaning. In doing so, this description provides an account of the analytical tools that will be needed for analysing McDonald’s. The narrative acknowledges the limitations of the structuralist perspective and addresses the thesis strategy for overcoming these limitations.

In describing the structuralist perspective, this section of the thesis demonstrates that despite structuralism’s primary focus upon the notion and representation of order, the approach does provide a useful theoretical understanding of both order and disorder. However, in spite of this theoretical account, the thesis argues that structuralism must be ‘pushed’ further. This section of the thesis argues that disorder must be brought to centre stage, recognised as a principal component in forming a continuing and constitutive dialectic between order and disorder. In turn, this order/disorder dialectic is shown to overcome the acknowledged limitation associated with structuralism, that of merely depicting a static view of order, by informing a historical perspective of change that from a structuralist perspective drives Western society.
Chapter 1--Ambiguity of order in classic structuralism.

Decoding the complex and ambiguous meanings signified by McDonald’s, as one of the most dominant food symbols of the late 20th century, is reliant on a tested system of analysis capable of locating and interpreting the meanings to be found in food and foodways. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the discipline of anthropology drew inspiration from the science of linguistics, employing structuralism as a paradigm for understanding basic social and mental processes. These transform the essential act of eating by humans, as ritual beings, into a rich cultural display, infusing food with extensive symbolic meaning. With concern for the universal, the structuralist approach took for its focus the relationships, differences and similarities between elements of the cultural system, rather than the elements themselves, looking for meaning at both conscious and unconscious levels. Structuralism was seen to look below the surface representation of culture, to be driven by a desire to uncover some deep sense of order that forms the basis of all human behaviour.

However, this focus on uncovering and articulating a sense of order produced a representation that appears static, devoid of recognising the impact of history in shaping a cultural system. This limitation of a structuralist approach constrains rather than negates the validity of analysis, so highlighting a need to address history in decoding McDonald’s. The structuralist’s attention to documenting order also overshadows structuralism’s accompanying fascination with those elements of the system that do not seem to fit, that are ambiguous; those disordered elements that seemingly contradict the sense of order. It is these elements of disorder that often fuelled the interest of those working within this discipline and in turn generated a useful theoretical account of the role disorder can play in constructing meaning. However, this account of disorder’s importance was left subservient to the function of order in producing social meaning.

Despite these seeming limitations, structuralism as a tradition offers the most useful tools to explain the complexity of meaning communicated by McDonald’s as a cultural construct and as part of our food and food related behaviour. By incorporating an historical approach into the existing structuralist methodology and
by recognising that disorder is not subservient to order, but rather part of a continuing and constructive dialectic between order and disorder and a duality of order, the structuralist tradition affords a means of decoding the complexity of the McDonald’s phenomenon. Such an approach will allow food, as a surface representation of culture, to speak of who and what we are.

**The use of binaries by Claude Lévi-Strauss**

An influential writer for the study of food has been the French structuralist and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. His work is driven by the humanist’s need to elucidate the seemingly irrational and the disordered and to comprehend the sense of order in what presents as disorder. While a minor part of his overall body of work, Lévi-Strauss’s thinking about food has become seminal within the field, albeit at times intellectually polarizing. Lévi-Strauss’s (1972) first exploration of cuisine utilised a simple system of binary opposites. His comparison of English and French cuisine is influenced by theories of structural linguistics. He said, “I have intentionally selected this somewhat flimsy example” (Lévi-Strauss, 1972, p. 87) to illustrate the value of the methodology in relation to contemporary Western society, rather than to the established sphere of the so-called ‘primitive societies’. This comment also reflects the status accorded food studies. Lévi-Strauss’s study has emerged as a benchmark in the examination of food as a system of communication and in comprehending the underlying ordering system.

Lévi-Strauss focuses on the symbolically rich areas where English cuisine differs from French, ignoring areas of commonality. He investigates the way in which English cuisine is perceived as different and disordered, where his own native cuisine is rather privileged. Lévi-Strauss (1972, p. 86) explains his approach:

> Like language, it seems to me, the cuisine of a society may be analysed into constituent elements, which in this case we might call “gustemes” and which may be organised according to certain structures of opposition and correlation. We might then distinguish English cooking from French cooking by means of three oppositions: *endogenous / exogenous* (that is, national versus exotic ingredients); *central / peripheral* (staple food versus accompaniments); *marked / not marked* (that
is, savoury or bland). We should then be able to construct a chart with + and - signs corresponding to the pertinent or non-pertinent character of each opposition in the system under consideration.

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<td>marked/not marked</td>
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In other words, in English cuisine the main dishes of a meal are made from endogenous ingredients, prepared in a relatively bland fashion, and surrounded with more exotic accompaniments, in which all the differential values are strongly marked (for example tea, fruitcake, marmalade and port wine). Conversely, in French cuisine the opposition *endogenous / exogenous* becomes very weak or disappears, and equally marked gustemes are combined together in a central as well as in a peripheral position.

Lévi-Strauss (1972) simultaneously recognises the inherent complexity and limitations of this simplified example by offering a critique of the application of the model to other cuisines. Recognising that further binaries need to be accounted for, yet conceding that whole societies could never be completely mapped to explain all aspects of the structure being studied, Lévi-Strauss cites the example of the difference between roast and stew, here drawing on the native cooking from the interior of Brazil to make his point. This jumping from society to society to provide appropriate examples can lead to criticism: that Lévi-Strauss has employed an overly selective method of building a cohesive argument. The core of Lévi-Strauss’s argument, however, is that by identifying and defining different structures in one sphere of a society (such as food practices), one can then begin to examine the repetition of these structures in other spheres of the society, or in other societies, thus revealing the deeper, subconscious attitudes

The simple French/English food example provided by Lévi-Strauss to silence critics of his concept - that symbolic systems other than language are capable of operating as a means of communication - opened a Pandora’s Box of new criticism. This criticism also serves to demonstrate the strength and effectiveness of food as communication system. Mennell (1985, pp. 7-8), in *All Manners of Food: Eating and*
Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present, summarises Lévi-Strauss’s argument:

in an English meal the main dishes are made from ingredients native to Britain cooked in a relatively bland way, but are surrounded with more strongly flavoured accompaniments of exotic origin (he mentions tea, fruitcake, marmalade and port!). On the other hand, in French cuisine, the opposition between exotic and endogenous ingredients is not emphasised, and strong flavours are a feature of central dishes as well as of accompaniments.

Mennell (1985, p. 8), in a display of nationalistic passion, is dismissive of Lévi-Strauss’s analysis and ventures that it is “simply giving expression in sophisticated vocabulary to the traditional Frenchman’s image of the English eating boiled chicken and swilling it down with fruitcake and port wine.” Mennell also argues that there is a class bias operating, in so far as it is an unfair comparison of French haute cuisine and English lower middle-class homecooking. The irritation contained within Mennell’s comment highlights not only the power of food to communicate complex messages, but importantly points towards the dialectic between order and disorder.

This seeming simplicity of Lévi-Strauss’s system of using binary opposites masks the inherent complexity in his classification system. Binary opposites mark not just two pole values but recognise a relationship that marks simultaneously both similarity and difference with the greater symbolic power accorded to the differences. Also implicit in this mapping is the creation of boundaries between the poles that serve to mark out categories; the expression of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion maps the classification of similarities, what is understood of the shared sense of order. In Lévi-Strauss’s example, both French and English share enough similarities in that their food habits are both understood as cuisines. This marks their inclusion within the category of cuisine. Simultaneously, there is an indication of a boundary of differences that marks how they are differentiated, each cuisine excluded from being included in the other category of either English or French cuisine. Secondly, binaries allow the creation of a hegemonic order based upon a hierarchy between the two opposites, with one pole’s value preferred over the other. Mennell’s attack on Lévi-Strauss therefore may not be solely academic but
also nationalistic. Lévi-Strauss is accused of cultural bias and of perpetuating a French culinary hegemony. Both writers clearly identify with the structure of their own national cuisine, finding order in the known and in being challenged by the disorder of difference.

**The culinary triangle**

Lévi-Strauss (1966a) expands the binary mode of analysis by developing it into the well-known and often criticised concept of ‘the culinary triangle’. Using two sets of oppositions at each point to construct a triangle model, Lévi-Strauss sought to illustrate how cooking is related to human thought. He begins by assigning to the three points of the triangle the respective values, which he notes are subject to various cultural interpretations, of the ‘raw’, the ‘cooked’ and the ‘rotted’. These values are subsequently aligned with the second set of values so that the points of the triangle become labelled raw/roasted, cooked/smoked and rotted/boiled.

**Figure 1. The Culinary Triangle**

Lévi-Strauss (1966a, p. 937) argues:

> It is clear that in respect to cooking the raw constitutes the unmarked pole, while the other two poles are strongly marked, but in different directions: indeed, the cooked is a cultural transformation, whereas the rotted is a natural transformation. Underlying our original triangle, there is hence a double opposition between the elaborated/unelaborated on the one hand, and culture/nature on the other.

This ordering of the triangle represents Lévi-Strauss’s thinking as developed from his extensive examination of the myths of the South American Indians. In the *Mythologiques* (particularly the first volume, *The Raw and the Cooked*) he develops the central common theme and his ordering principle of all myths, which he sees in
terms of a primary binary, the passage from nature to culture. All myths are viewed
as ordered by the placement of humans between nature and culture, with the myth
offering an explanation for how humans demonstrate a superiority over nature, for
example humans’ acquisition of fire. Therefore, in the model the transformation of
food from raw into cooked is the symbolic surface representation of the deeper
universal, this primary binary of nature to culture. In the transformation of food from
raw to cooked there is the demonstration of movement from nature to culture.

To advance the model, Lévi-Strauss overlays the abstract values (of raw, cooked and
rotten) of his culinary triangle with a ‘triangle of recipes’ that attempts to marry the
tangible categories of cooking techniques (smoking, roasting and boiling) to the
intangible, so as to illustrate the cohesiveness in thinking generated by the
nature/culture distinction. Demonstrating the relationship by using various examples
to illustrate affinity between certain values, for example where culture/boiled is
viewed as superior to nature/roasted, Lévi-Strauss then proceeds to challenge the
deep-seated sense of order that he has just illustrated using the model, by resort to
paradoxical examples drawn from societies where the hierarchical values of the
opposites are inverted; for example, where culture/roasted is viewed as superior to
nature/boiled:

The existence of these inverted systems naturally poses a problem, and leads one to
think that the axes of opposition are still more numerous than one suspected, and
that the peoples where these inversions exist refer to axes different from those we at
first singled out (Lévi-Strauss, 1966a, p. 938).

To accommodate these inverted examples in the desired order, Lévi-Strauss seeks
recourse to the hierarchies created between the opposites. The use of inversion to
create disorder maintains and acknowledges the fundamental relationship between
poles, but seeks to generate alternative meaning based upon different hierarchical
positioning.

In the following example Lévi-Strauss offers an explanation of how this works as a
means of marking social order. He argues that boiling, which conserves the meat and
juices, is linked to frugality and the plebeian, while roasting, which is linked with
destruction and loss, is coupled with prodigality and the aristocratic. This class-based analysis is then expanded by Lévi-Strauss to explain the democratic or aristocratic perspective of the group. Groups that value boiling over roasting are democratic in nature while groups that preference roasting are equated to an aristocratic perspective. This ambiguity marks similarity but expresses a different social orientation based upon a bottom-up and top-down perspective, effectively a duality of order. Recognition of this ambiguity is critical to the development of our understanding of the ways in which food communicates order or disorder. It is not, however, fully elaborated by Lévi-Strauss.

The ambiguity that is presented by paradoxical examples ostensibly threatens the order of the system, however this is inherent to and symbolically important for the model, leaving Lévi-Strauss (1966a, p. 940) moved to explain. As the art of cooking is not located entirely on the side of culture he argues, there must be ambiguity in the structure to represent symbolically the ambiguous place of humans, located somewhere between nature and culture. It is in this dissymmetry that the structure holds the ability to generate its own myth, precisely in order to conceal its dissymmetry. Order is generated out of the disorder, but disorder remains intrinsic and persists as a constant threat to the destabilisation of the system. Food will always be symbolically ambiguous, open to different interpretations because of its position between nature and culture.

Lévi-Strauss recognises inadequacy of his model as it stands. He further complicates the triangle by introducing new cooking techniques (frying in oil), and by suggesting another elaboration. This is the recognition of the opposite expressed by the category of foodstuffs (animal and vegetable). This increasingly intricate model still requires a historical perspective, Lévi-Strauss concedes, a personal recognition of the broader limitations of structuralism, and reference to other social contrasts between, for example, men and women or the sacred and profane. It is only when this advanced level of complexity is reached that Lévi-Strauss suggests the model can then become of any use for decoding specific examples of cooking.

culinary triangle. “(T)he general reader may well consider the culinary triangle a farrago of nonsense, though many anthropologists and sociologists appear to take it seriously”. There is an ambiguity that pervades Mennell’s criticism: dismissiveness coupled with a tacit acknowledgement that Lévi-Strauss may be onto something instructive.

Criticisms of Lévi-Strauss’s model focus on a seeming lack of order within the model. The model is viewed as cobbled together by Lévi-Strauss’s use of a linguistic framework and disparate examples to create a concept that delivers a predetermined outcome. It is this focus on and privileging of the order of the model, a focus on the binary poles, rather than on the inherent tension of the relationship, the order and disorder dialectic and its offer of insight, that is problematic. The model is ordered but not in a manner that seeks to reduce the sense of disorder in this surface representation of the everyday. The model must simultaneously highlight disorder, preferencing the symbolic (such as the human’s ambiguous position between the poles of nature and culture), while recognising that any ambiguity viewed must be assimilated back into a notion of order, a process Lévi-Strauss identified as ‘auto-annihilation’. This ordering of the model in turn raises questions of cultural objectivism and subjectivism that relate to Lévi-Strauss’s frame of reference, particularly as he tries to move between the surface or ‘conscious’ layer and the deeper ‘unconscious’ layers.

**Constructing order -- a social dialectic**

The concern expressed by critics, related to the perceived lack of scientific rigour in which Lévi-Strauss draws together his examples to substantiate the order in the culinary triangle, is illustrative of the insight into different modes of thinking identified by Lévi-Strauss (1966b) in *The Savage Mind*. The book is a study of methods and explains how primitive cultures use elements from their everyday to construct symbolic systems, particularly systems of classification, systems of order that enable people to comprehend their world. From this study Lévi-Strauss identifies that there are two distinct ways of thinking that can be employed to develop classification systems. The first, a modern scientific reductionist approach with its specialised modes of thinking, is focused on generating productivity and grew out of
the Classical Greek culture; and the second, a more ancient holistic approach that still continues to exist and that formed the basis of a ‘primitive science’ that dates to the European pre-Neolithic era. In contemporary Western society the two modes of thinking co-exist, but the reductionist scientific approach has become dominant.

Lévi-Strauss (1966b, p. 16-35) suggests that this logic of ‘primitive science’ or ‘concrete logic’ is a mode of thinking that embraces sensory perception, by using extensive systems of analogies that function at the level of personal experience. This creates order in a manner that is suggestive of an intellectual form of the French concept of *bricolage*; that is, like the work of a bricoleur who works with what is at hand to combine existing elements into a chosen form of order, selected from the range of possible combinations of the elements. In this instance the elements used for construction are signs; these form an intermediary between images and concepts, concrete objects that are laden with the mark of human involvement. These signs are then used by the bricoleur to create order in a new way; while intact with their history and the sense of meaning from previous use, they are to some extent compromised and limited in their future use. In construction the bricoleur speaks not only of him/herself with things, but also through the medium of things. Thus bricoleurs disclose something about their own lives and character through the objects that they create and the signs that they select to construct their creation. The new object’s form is limited by the bricoleur’s experience and the elements that are at hand, a personal expression of mediation between individual and the world. While this also constrains bricolage as a form of thinking, the mode remains important, from a humanist perspective, for all forms of societies because it allows the individual to search for meaning in the signs of the everyday. It is a means of protesting against meaninglessness. For Lévi-Strauss (1966b), this ‘science of the concrete’ allows us to use our own perceptions, in the establishment of relationships, to explain a general and holistic understanding of the universe.

Lévi-Strauss (1966b) discerned another difference between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ societies, which he suggests is the difference in the manner that these two types of societies and their classificatory systems deal with history, either eliminating or integrating it. This distinction creates two classifications of society that Lévi-Strauss (1966b, pp. 233-4) has labelled as ‘‘cold’ and ‘hot’ societies: the former seeking, by
the institutions they give themselves, to annul the possible effects of historical factors on their equilibrium and continuity in a quasi-automatic fashion; the latter resolutely internalizing the historical process and making it the moving power of their development.” Modern Western societies are examples of the ‘hot’ genre, that is, societies that are focused on a linear concept of time and progressive change. Central to a ‘hot’ society’s understanding of itself is the way it views history as a stimulus to development, thus setting its trajectory. ‘Cold’ societies are rather dedicated to maintaining equilibrium and resisting change, embracing a cyclical and temporal form of time. Integral to a ‘hot’ society’s mode of operation is the need to generate significant energy or order to move the society forward. This is accomplished by a drive to be productive, a result also arising from the modern scientific reductionist approach to thinking. In this drive for order, however, there is also the generation of a large amount of entropy or disorder. Fundamental to the powering of ‘hot’ societies is the development and functioning of internal differences or social hierarchies that enable one section of society to impose its power over another. This relationship between dominant and dominated is critical to the creation of the status quo, order, but, more importantly, for the generation of disorder and the dynamics of change that this produces. Thus it is that ‘hot’ societies derive their drive from the interplay of order and disorder.

Lévi-Strauss’s classification of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies, based upon their differentiated construct of history, moves toward explaining and overcoming the acknowledged limitation of the structuralist perspective: that it does not adequately account for historical change. ‘Cold’ or primitive societies, the principle focus of anthropological literature, are by their very construct aiming to maintain a state of equilibrium by minimising the effects of history. It is only in a ‘hot’ or modern society that there is explicit acknowledgement of history, through the internalised concept of differentiating the past from the present in a linear fashion.

“Dirt”: understanding disorder

Lévi-Strauss’s use of binaries generates recognition of the relationship between order and disorder, as well as highlighting the critical role disorder plays in the construction of social order. Expressed as a binary, order and disorder recognise a
similarity, while simultaneously noting a boundary of differentiation. Mary Douglas, the British social anthropologist, advances Lévi-Strauss’s analysis by developing a useful theoretical account of disorder as differentiation in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966, p. 1). She begins with the comment “The nineteenth century saw in primitive religions two peculiarities which separate them as a block from the great religions of the world. One was that they were inspired by fear, the other that they were inextricably confused with defilement and hygiene.” This difference fuels her intellectual curiosity; unhappy with existing case specific and thus piecemeal explanations of ritual, she set out to examine the broad concepts of ritual pollution and taboos. Framed within the structural anthropological tenet that both predates and acknowledges the work of Lévi-Strauss, where no one set of classifying symbols stands in isolation and where classification symbols can only be understood within the total structure of any culture, her study set out to show “that rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience. So far from being aberrations from the central project of religion, they are positive contributions to atonement. By their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning” (Douglas, 1966, pp. 2-3).

Beginning with the binary opposites of holiness and impurity, Douglas (1966, pp. 7-8) is attracted to and confronted by the quandary that in her culture, with its rules of cleanliness, there is nothing to suggest a relationship between dirt and sacredness. Sacred things are to be protected from defilement, yet she suggests that it is supposed to be a mark of primitive religion that no clear distinction is made between sacredness and uncleanness. Douglas’s study of the concept of ‘dirt’ thus triggers reflection not only on the relationship of purity to impurity but also order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, and life to death. Dirt, because it is seen as differentiated and thus conceptually ambiguous, confronts the notion of order: “dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” (Douglas, 1966, p. 2). As such, dirt as a pollutant needs to be dealt with in some manner, to remove the inherent danger associated with disorder and to set about restoring a sense of order. Thus in the active elimination of dirt there is a positive effort to impose a sense of order on the environment by dealing with and eliminating disorder. The act of cleaning becomes a means to create an idealised
arrangement to associate form with function and create a ritually unified experience. This is the same process of order harmonisation that Lévi-Strauss had labelled auto-annihilation.

Douglas (1966, p. 3) suggests that the concept of pollution operates at two levels in a society: firstly, instrumentally and secondly, expressively. At the first level, the most apparent, we observe people trying to influence one another’s behaviour towards a desired goal. Political power and certain moral values become legitimated while others are denigrated (invested as polluted); this process is driven by the socially dominant imposing a hegemonic sense of social order. Douglas contends that societies are held together by these attempts to prescribe one another’s behaviour and enforce good citizenship. Lévi-Strauss suggested that these social hierarchies are fundamental to the development of Western-style societies.

Douglas’s second level of pollution, and the level that Douglas suggests she finds more interesting, relates to social life. She discusses the belief that contact with sexual fluids threatens the other sex with sexual pollution. This example is used to demonstrate how some pollution, operating through symbolism and analogies, serves to signify a more general view of the social order and hierarchy construction. This means of understanding the world reflects the bricoleur’s mode of thinking labelled ‘concrete logic’ by Lévi-Strauss, where a holistic understanding of the universe is aimed at. In this mode of thinking, repetition and coherency of order (which is a tenet of structuralist understanding) dictate no specific set of classifying symbols can be isolated from the total structure of any culture. Individual examples of classifying are consistent with the larger society, an encoded signifying of just what that society considers to be ordered and, by extrapolation, disordered.

The pervasive construct of social order prompts Douglas to caution against allowing any cultural bias and preferencing to impact on the already difficult task of deciphering symbolic structures from within a culture, where the culture is perceived as natural. Alternatively, she cautions, where a different set of cultural values can limit understanding and generate prejudice the emic view also produces a perception of culture as static. Douglas (1966, pp. 4-5) contends that while culture may seem timeless and unchanging to its members, their sense of order is forever interacting
with the forces that initially shaped the system, continually modifying and enriching it. This perception is not unexpected, according to both Douglas and Lévi-Strauss’s thinking, as people seek and embrace the stability provided by order, and seek to diminish or annihilate the impact and change generated by any form of disorder.

To demonstrate the effect of cultural bias Douglas contrasts the two modes of thinking as outlined by Lévi-Strauss, ‘modern scientific’ and ‘primitive science’, in relationship to the historical interpretation of ritual uncleanness. Using the food laws found in the Old Testament book of Leviticus as an example, Douglas (1966, p. 29) argues that food behaviours that should be properly understood as symbolic rites are too often explained away in terms of our modern scientific understanding of effective hygiene practices. According to Douglas, the interpretation of these Jewish food laws “has always been bedevilled by medical materialism.” She quips that it would be a pity to treat Moses as an enlightened public health administrator, rather than a spiritual leader. Douglas, however, concedes that the distinction can be difficult to make when there is a strong overlap. She argues that this should provide no base for confusing and then diminishing ritual importance in favour of a hygienic by-product. Here we see Douglas restating Lévi-Strauss’s position, and cautioning against confusing two distinct means of thinking by allowing a familiar modern scientific system of ordering to be preferred over ‘primitive science’.

At this point, Douglas (1966, p. 35) uses the inherent ambiguity generated by dirt as an agent of disorder to request that her reader re-examine the notion of dirt by attempting to abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our construct, suggesting that “we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place.” Douglas (1966, p. 35) affirms that this statement is predicated on two conditions, “a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order;” and that dirt can only be understood as dirt because “Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter.” Conceptually, this view--that seeks to isolate disorder--challenges the habitual processes of thinking that would seek means to incorporate an ambiguous element back into the order of the classification system. It is this auto-annihilation of disorder that is used to provide a sense of comfortable stability in a world of chaos, where the ambiguous elements must be placed in such a way that they can form a harmonised part of a recognisable pattern. This thinking provides an individual with
two courses of action to deal with ambiguity. Negatively, the ambiguous element cannot be harmonised into the order, leaving three possible alternative actions: “we can ignore, just not perceive them, or perceiving we can condemn.” Alternately, in a positive vein we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality into which the disordered element has been incorporated (Douglas, 1966, p. 38). While the individual could readily restructure their own classification systems, they remain interdependently linked with the existing cultural classification schemes.

What becomes important for Douglas in understanding the concept of dirt as matter out of place is that disorder must be approached through its relationship with order, if the pattern is to be upheld. This becomes the key to understanding the concept of pollution. Meaning is not found in the value expressed by one binary pole but only in the dialectic between values. “It involves us in no clear-cut distinction between sacred and secular. Furthermore, it involves no special distinction between primitives and moderns: we are all subject to the same rules. But in a primitive culture the rule of patterning works with greater force and more total comprehensiveness. With moderns it applies to disjointed, separate areas of existence” (Douglas, 1966, p. 40).

Douglas suggests that order, by definition, entails restriction, stifling the possible range of order. This restricting highlights that despite the drive to create order and eliminate disorder from the system, disorder must remain and command respect because it has a vital role to play. Symbolically, disorder is dangerous because it challenges the existing order. It becomes a catalyst for change and a powerful force, offering the building material for new patterns of order.

To harness this potential disorder, rituals such as Carnival are practiced, actively tapping into the energy inherent in the danger and the power that lies outside the boundary imposed by order: “Ritual recognizes the potency of disorder” (Douglas, 1966, p. 94). Ritual draws energy from the harnessing of the power invested in the ambiguous and transgressive by recognition of movement: ‘stepping away’ from one classified state across boundaries, through a zone of marginal status, before stepping back into the realm of order. This transgressive period is perceived as particularly dangerous because of the ambiguity for both the individual passing through and the
society at large, as they become invested with and linked to the wider symbolic meaning associated with disorder. As a means of facilitating transgression, ritual can invest in everyday objects, particularly objects that are already ambiguous, a symbolic meaning that serves to amplify disorder. While disorder may apparently appear haphazardly spread throughout a society, it remains cohesive in terms of being charged with the role of challenging the existing order. Yet despite disorder’s function to challenge, disorder remains supportive of the hierarchical social structure.

The seemingly incongruous support that disorder provides the social structure serves to remind that disorder is regenerative and rewards a reproduction of conformity. Douglas (1966, p. 114) reminds us of the form of the powerful image of society, with its “external boundaries, margins and internal structure,” charged with “energy in its margins and unstructured areas.” Using the body as a symbolic example of society, Douglas explores the concept of external boundaries with respect to disorder and pollution. The body expels through its orifices, viewed as zones of ambiguity, excreta, milk, blood, urine and faeces. These materials transgress the boundary of the body; they become invested symbolically as pollutants and are thus seen as disordered. Symbolically, the intensity of pollution is magnified if the excreta are to re-transgress by returning into the body. To transfer this thinking to food opens up the possibility of food being viewed as a powerful symbol of disorder. Food must also transgress the boundary of the body, passing through the ambiguous orifice of the mouth, and is subject to concepts of symbolic purity such as those expressed in the dietary laws of Leviticus. Food offers mediation between the body and the world, and is not a simple restorative but is also pregnant with a symbolic meaning of disorder. As Douglas (1966, pp. 41-57) showed, the dietary laws expressed in Leviticus also link pollution ritual to moral instruction, providing a secondary means of reinforcing social order; in doing so they invest the food with symbolic elements and a particular moral value.

This secondary reinforcing of social order is further evidence of the system of existing order protecting itself from challenge. Throughout *Purity and Danger* Douglas (1966) painstakingly develops her exploration of the notion of order and disorder. According to Douglas, order is reliant on a humanly made, consistent system of classification and hierarchies. Douglas explains away cultural differences
between societies, particularly primitive and modern ones, differentiated by their dominant mode of thinking, by suggesting what is important is that throughout any classification system, like is linked to like creating the unity of meaning. This valuing of the relationship rather than the respective poles helps explain away the seeming abnormalities of examples of inverted values, by pointing the way towards the recognition of the duality of order. For Douglas, the human condition favours a focus on order; it is natural to seek out the safety and harmony offered by order and to seek to be free from the perceived danger offered by ambiguity and disorder. This, however, leaves order as a lived experience devoid of rich meaning, stagnant, an enemy of change. Disorder as part of a dialectic with order remains vital to the successful operation of a Western ‘hot’ society and the maintenance and renewal of the existing system order. The drive to maintain a harmonious state requires recognition of the inherent tension between opposites and societies need to put in place ritual strategies to mediate and neutralise the tension. It explains why, in ritual, pollutants are often used in rites of restoration, helping re-energise life and providing a stimulus to a life in quest of purity. To return to the concept of ‘dirt as matter out of place’ Douglas (1966, p. 161) states “dirt was created by the differentiating activity of mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order.” That is, it symbolically became noticeable because it is charged with the higher symbolic value of disorder, danger and power, and thus provides a threat to the notions of good order. From Douglas’s (1966) argument, a theoretical understanding of disorder deeper than that offered by Lévi-Strauss emerges. This is that it is only by recourse to disorder that the system of order can be clearly articulated, and it is only by recourse to disorder that the system of order can be energised and opened to the possibility of change. Disorder, while seemingly a threat and challenge to the system, holding out promise of change, actually works to maintain the hegemony by identifying the existing order, framing it by marking its boundaries and then by holding a mirror up to society and allowing reflection upon itself.

‘Deciphering the meal’

Douglas (1975, pp. 249-275) builds on her view that order, as mapped in Leviticus, represents a consistent system of classification and hierarchies. She transfers her attention from the broad analysis and etic perspective she displayed in *Purity and*
Danger. In the first section of Deciphering a Meal, she develops an intimate and narrowly focused emic analysis of the social system, based on the micro analysis of food categories drawn from her British middle-class domestic setting. This change in era opens an important historical trace that Douglas does not pursue in her analysis. Reflecting upon her own food habits and catalysed by a household argument in response to her suggested meal (thick soup), Douglas aims to take what she labels a trivial example and opens the discussion into a weightier realm. Douglas’s plan is itself an example of the potential for an examined existence, generated out of the order/disorder dialectic.

Using a structural methodology of analysis and pre-empting the inevitable criticism of this approach, Douglas opens with a rhetorical question: “If language is a code, where is the precoded message? The question is phrased to expect the answer: nowhere.” Rephrasing the question and shifting from linguistics to anthropology, thus tracing the heritage of the approach, Douglas ventures that “If food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relationships being expressed” (Douglas, 1975, p. 249). Food in this instance is seen to rise above its role as biological necessity and becomes a complex map of culture and an expression of the human as a ritual being.

Beginning with an account of her family’s food practices and debate on what constitutes a ‘proper meal’, Douglas seeks to illuminate how food classification systems are constructed and therefore able to provide insight into how the family defines what is a ‘proper meal’. Turning first to her own discipline of anthropology, Douglas seeks inspiration from the work of Lévi-Strauss. While noting that it provides a useful departure point, Douglas rejects the work for its universalism, citing two major failings: firstly, its departure from the small-scale social relationships that engender codification, for the rarefied atmosphere of a quest for a precoded and panhuman universal food code; secondly, for Lévi-Strauss’s reliance upon the methodological technique of binary analysis without any method that accounts for assessing the relative values of the emergent pairs. Douglas (1975, p. 251) argues that it is not enough to map the relationships of the binary pairs, but that the expressed opposition can only be comprehended within the context of the order expressed in their syntagmatic relationships. Turning, just as Lévi-Strauss had done
previously, to the discipline of linguistics for appropriate tools, Douglas draws on the work of Michael Halliday (1961) for a detailed representation of the analogy between the patterned activities of talking and eating. Surprisingly, Douglas remains silent on the cultural bias of the value-laden classifications and sequencing evident in the British-based ordering system that Halliday uses as a structuring element.

Acknowledging the complexity of mapping the subtleties of any food classification system, Douglas (1975, p. 254) resorts to the use of binary opposites to simultaneously simplify and progress her analysis. She states that the “two major contrast of food categories are meals versus drinks.” In this binary Douglas institutes a hierarchy and a complex value system that preferences meals over drinks, and food and/or beverage that is consumed in a communal social setting over any individual private eating, which is valued at the lower level of ‘just nourishment’. Meals are valued higher than drinks because they are visible in their command of a greater level of ritual performance, structural complexity, and expressed linguistic value, given identifying individual names such as lunch or dinner. Conceding that this ordering and value assignment is open to criticism, Douglas does speak from a position of the emic and thus has an intimacy with the system of order. While she is dismissive of Lévi-Strauss and his universalism, it is worth observing that within the values of Douglas’s binaries, the nature/culture binary is clearly evident, with meals commanding higher value because of their perceived ability to demonstrate a greater distancing from nature, for example in their heavier reliance on cultural artefacts.

Wishing to cut short the potential for criticism, Douglas (1975, p. 256) moves quickly to drawing conclusions that speak of the social categories that have materialised. “Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honoured guests. The grand operating system is the line between intimacy and distance. Those we know at meals we also know at drinks. The meal expresses close friendship. Those we only know at drinks we know less intimately.” The level of intimacy of the social relationship is marked by boundaries that rely on symbolic reference to food to express subtlety and nuance in their creation and observance. The richness of the system can be witnessed in the intricacies that help mark these boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Diverse elements such as place, time, occasion, or the temperature of food (for example, cold
food in Douglas’s schema is less intimate than a hot meal) are acknowledged as being all employed, singularly and in combination, in creating symbolic meaning. With reference back to comments made by her family, Douglas concedes that the understanding of this complex system of order may not be verbally articulated in practice, but rather demonstrated in manifestations of attitudes and behaviour in navigating the everyday, or during the focus triggered by the need to deal with perceived ambiguity or disorder.

The intensity of meaning Douglas (1975, p. 257) suggests can be further uncovered by examination of the sequencing of meals and ties back into the social life of the community in question. The sequence of meals provides a timekeeping function across not only the day, week and year, but also across the lifetime, tied precisely to rituals great and small that mark the calendar. Each meal becomes an element of a longer sequence, linked by its membership to the classification of meal and entwined in a symbiotic relationship with the ritual, investing and acquiring meaning from its associated ritual and carrying its correlated meaning forward. The more important the ritual the grander are the needs of the corresponding meal. With significant rituals there is a greater need to align and invest the meal with symbolic meaning that supports and restates the value system of the hegemony. Similarly, meals associated with rituals of disorder, such as Carnival, must also be symbolically coherent, constructed in reference to both the order of meals and the tradition of disorder.

“Meals are ordered in scale of importance and grandeur through the week and the year. The smallest, meanest meal metonymically figures the structure of the grandest, and each unit of the grand meal figures again the whole meal – or the meanest meal” (Douglas, 1975, p. 257).

Meals are thus only interpreted as ‘proper meals’ for as long as they maintain adherence to, and reproduce within, the restricted sense of order and hierarchy, those structures and characteristics that denote the category of a ‘meal’. The meal must repeat an analogy of the classification of meal to be defined as a meal. Within Douglas’s analysis she concedes there are categories that are ambiguous, such as ‘cocktails’, that have both a food and drink component. This ambiguity highlights the lower boundary of the classification ‘meal’, a classification that stretches from here to the classical formal dinner. Within the boundaries there is no one point that marks
the central or genuine definition of the ‘meal’. Individual meals only obtain meaning by reference to other meals at differing levels of the hierarchy.

Understanding of the meal is in turn not isolated from the pattern of ordering of other systems within the culture’s environments, and nor is it without comparability to varying degrees of similarity and differentiation with other related cultural patterns of order. While adherence to order generates the appearance of stagnation, systems of order remain open to the constant threat of danger and change inherent in the system, provided by the presence of disorder. While not directly addressing the specific role of disorder in this discussion, Douglas remains cognizant of the impact that disorder has on the dynamics of the system.

Douglas’s (1975, p. 260) conclusion succinctly sums up her argument:

The meaning of a meal is found in the system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of other meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image. The upper limit of its meaning is set by the range incorporated in the most important member of the series. The recognition which allows each member to be classed and graded with the others depends on the structure, common to them all.

While Douglas can be seen to offer valuable insight here into how order is reproduced, including across time, her view is limited to a perspective of order that is hegemonic and does not take into full account the dialectic afforded by order and disorder.

**Reading the English meal – mapping order**

This class-based construct of order resurfaces in a Masters thesis Michael Nicod completed under Douglas’s supervision. The thesis sought to investigate the eating practices of four British urban ‘working-class’ families, with the primary stated objective of the research being “to test empirically the thesis that food is a medium of communication. The thesis rests on the claim that food is shared and exchanged to maintain a pattern of social relationships” (Nicod, 1974, p. 1). In its use of
classifications, this project demonstrates a preoccupation with mapping the order Douglas articulated while obscuring the revealing role played by the dialectic between order and disorder in generating the research and the existence of a duality of order, particularly the possibility of a food-based bottom-up challenge to the hegemonic order.

The research was carried out as part of a study for the Department of Health and Social Security, focused on investigating a method for distinguishing acceptable and unacceptable innovation in food habits and, in turn, how this information could be applied by dieticians to ‘improve’ people’s diet (Douglas and Nicod, 1974, p. 744). Nicod’s research, while a test of Douglas’s theory, also forms part of one of many historical attempts to impose a differing form of order on the diets of people in lower socio-economic categories. Arising from Nicod’s research was an attempt to understand how foods viewed as desirable by public health officials and dieticians, a social group charged with hegemonic power, could be incorporated into working-class diets. Nicod identified reasons why consumption of these ‘improved’ foods would be subject to resistance, because they have been categorised as external to the category of ‘normal’, ordered foods when viewed from the lower-class perspective, thus they are conceived as disordered and not consumed.

The order suspected by Douglas was observed by Nicod in the similarity of food habits displayed by the four families. Food behaviour was ordered in a pattern that exhibited a strong class bias, with consumption practices forming a base for class distinction. Each meal was patterned, courses followed in a strict order of sequence, and food chosen for each course from specific categories with reference to an underlying tripartite structure (main, minor or tertiary food event and the staple, centre [meat] and trimmings). Each food event had a set of appropriate alternatives moderated by regard for the importance of the particular social event. From this, a chain of meals connecting the different categories of food developed. Diet then could be plotted as the elements on two axes, chain and choice. To begin to understand how this structure is built, factors that provide the symbolic values were explored by Nicod (1974, pp. 59-78), with each selected family’s micro-systems placed in the context of the broad cultural environment, but particularly the specific working-class context of English food habits.
Despite parliamentary criticism of Nicod’s research, Douglas and Nicod (1974, p. 744) defended the benefit of this research, arguing that it was instrumental in building important public health understanding. This is not the only reason the research should be viewed as important, however not only did the research map the order expressed in the family’s food habits; it also served to highlight the functioning of the dialectic between order and disorder that drove the commissioning of the research. The Department of Health and Social Security’s understanding of the working-class diet as differentiated and deficient illustrates the power relationship and hierarchical nature expressed in this duality of order, while the desire to reorder the working-class food habits demonstrates the auto-annihilation of disorder in action.

**Food as signifier of a way of life**

Barthes (1961) explores this ability of food to act as a sign of order and signifier of difference in lifestyle in his paper *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*. He commences by using the American consumption of sugar to symbolise the difference in order between the French and American cultural food systems. Barthes observes that in America sweet food is ordinarily saturated with sugar, with sugar also used in dishes that the French would not consider sweetening. Here Barthes constructs a binary opposition between the two national cuisines that recognises a relationship that marks simultaneously similarity and difference, but with the greater symbolic power accorded to the difference expressed in sugar. The American use of sugar is presented as a natural part of its ordered system, while from a French perspective this level of sugar use would be interpreted as disorder. Sugar, when presented in this ambiguous manner, provides Barthes (1979, p. 167) with an example that he hopes permits his French audience to adopt an etic position in considering what is ‘obvious’. By focusing on a differentiated element, Barthes is not only able to demonstrate food as a system of communication but, by virtue of sugar’s positioning as an element of disorder, is enabled to embark on a questioning of the nature of order not just within food systems but also the wider cultural system.
Barthes (1979, pp. 166-7) suggests that sugar is not just simply a foodstuff but is invested with a wide range of symbolic meaning: “through the sugar, it also means to experience the day, periods of rest, travelling, and leisure in a specific fashion that is certain to have its impact on the American.” In France a similar substance would be wine: “Sugar and wine, these two superabundant substances are also institutions. And these institutions necessarily imply a set of images, dreams, taste, choices, and values.” Food, Barthes recognises, is not just a collection of products but is “also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour.” For Barthes the very concept of food extends beyond an individual’s personal values or preferences or the nutritional; food is not simply eaten but simultaneously experienced as a signifier. Food becomes an expression of a collective consciousness.

The sophistication and richness of this communication causes Barthes (1979, pp.168-169) to acknowledge the complexity of trying to map food as a language. Initially one would need to complete an inventory of everything known of food in a particular society (products, techniques and habits), Barthes argues, and then these facts would need to be subject to the linguistic technique of transformational analysis; that is, to observe if there is a difference in signification in the passage from one fact to another. Barthes illustrates this concept of transformational analysis by drawing on the example of the historical change in status of brown bread in relationship to white bread. These changes, and the class differences in taste they articulate, would then need to be accounted for. This phenomenon, of food and other cultural representations of the petit-bourgeoisie as a communicator of social values, strikes a chord, becoming a recurring theme in essays by Barthes (1973, 1979 and 1982). He then suggests that food and its relationship to history would also need to be accommodated into the schema. Then the symbolic language, mapping food as signifier not only of themes or situations but also the ‘spirit’ of food, would need to be incorporated. It is only by creating this rich overlay of elements and relationships that the complexity of food as a system of communication can be witnessed. For Barthes, it is in the meditation of the complexity of all these elements and relationships that insight into the mental life and order of the community is generated.
Barthes (1979, pp. 171-2) argues that within this system, food as a signifier can stand for not only themes or situations but also a whole way of life. Eating can be seen to transcend the need of the nutritional and embrace the signification of culture. For Barthes (1979, p.172), “(W)e might almost say that this “polysemy” of food characterizes modernity; in the past, only festive occasions were signalized by food in any positive and organized manner.” In contemporary Western society all aspects of life have their own kinds of food operating at the level of a sign. Food symbols operate by signifying differences, and by focusing on these differences Barthes has been able to highlight food as a system of language that communicates a sense of social order. His argument also demonstrates the power of disorder to provide a frame for order, a catalyst and fuel for change and a mirror-reflecting society. Barthes shows not only food as a signifier of social order but also that disorder, while seemingly a threat to the system (and so potentially to be eliminated), is vital in maintaining the sense of order of a society’s core set of values.

**Conclusion**

The structuralist approach, by drawing on methodology borrowed from linguistics to supplement its anthropology, has allowed Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, Nicod and Barthes to embark on an explanation of food as a form of code. Collectively, they have recognised that food operates at two distinct levels, nutritionally and ritually, as a complex system of communication that is not only capable of articulating intricate meaning, even signifying a whole way of life, but also of conveying a coherent and consistent map of the system of order used by a society to understand its world. Food as a form of code is not a map of the individual elements of the system but, importantly, demonstrations of the manner on which relationships between the elements are constructed and, in turn, how meaning is generated. After revealing the existence of this food language, each author has been forced to acknowledge the sheer complexity and challenge of trying to reproduce in a model this culinary system of communication. In an effort to advance their discussion, each writer has retreated to using a simple construct of binary opposites as a means of charting elements of the code.
Structuralism’s use of this binary form to model the social order expressed by food habits has resulted in a limited static representation of order, rather than an expression of the dynamic relationship that is inherent in the system. Using binary opposites as the base of a classification system, the pole elements must be labelled and constructed as significantly contrasted, different, but remaining simultaneously grouped, understood and sustained by an ongoing relationship. Here attention becomes focused on the symbolically richer points of differences, rather than the more numerous points of similarities. The construct of difference in turn has the effect of producing a hierarchy, with one pole being valued over the other and the order of these values dependent on the perspective of the interpreter. Within the relationship between poles there can be an infinite number of sub-sets marked by constantly contested boundaries of inclusion and exclusion; these sub-sets are also categorised hierarchically by their relationship to the other sub-sets. The implicit ambiguity associated with the liminality of boundaries is suppressed by the process of auto-annihilation, as the system seeks to maintain the equilibrium of order and thus generate the appearance of being static or ordered. The system, in order to function properly, must conceal its own dynamism, generated by the constant dialectic between order and disorder. This drives it along the trajectory that Lévi-Strauss ascribes to the primary binary nature/culture.

These ordering principles in turn construct binary opposites that manifest themselves in the structuralist’s research. Levi-Strauss and Douglas both note difference between modern, or what Levi-Strauss labelled ‘hot’ societies, and primitive, or ‘cold’ societies, and the dominant manner of their thinking. Two other important themes, based on differences, reoccur throughout the analyses. These are differences that are constructed on notions of nationalism and class. Both provide categories that mark inclusion and exclusion and give rise to persistent criticism of bias in the value system, with the sense of order preferred upon one’s category of inclusion. Class distinction clearly displays this construction of difference and hierarchy, built upon and representative of a social hegemony. Each class seeks to distance and mark itself as differentiated from other socio-economic groups while, simultaneously, dominant groups try to impose their own sense of order as a form of moral authority. This power relationship interplay is witnessed and disguised in the pretext of public health, which provided the impetus for Nicod’s work. Binaries construct order in
such a manner that the dominant group will view the lower order as excluded by
signs of differentiation, expressing qualities of disorder, and as such they are seen to
represent a challenge to the order of the system that should be eliminated or at least
changed.

While each author has focused on articulating the order present, this does not serve to
diminish an acknowledgement of the role of disorder. In a binary system order and
disorder are mutually dependent. The concept of order implies there must also be a
concept of disorder. The importance of disorder is remembered in the role that it
played as a catalyst in each of the four authors’ research. Their initial attention was
drawn by a sign that was at a margin of the system, a sign pregnant with ambiguity,
of disorder. Disorder is attention-seeking, symbolically more powerful due to its
position at a boundary, and therefore must be actively considered.

Systems of order are constructed from the set of elements available, in the fashion of
the bricoleur, with each person and society fashioning order in a consistent manner
that reflects their experience and perspective of the world. Existing elements of order
and disorder are taken and shaped into a new desired structure with an assigned
meaning that reflects the bricoleur’s perspective of order. Simultaneously, this allows
each element to retain something of its pre-existing meaning independent of its role
in the new form.

The bricoleur’s action of rearrangement facilitates an incorporation and concealment
of disorder back into the system of order, in the process that Levi-Strauss labelled
auto-annihilation. Disorder represents a threat to the existing static system of order,
holding out potential for change by questioning the current form of order.
Particularly in the case of the cultural system related to food, which is viewed as
relatively stable but not static, disorder is viewed as a significant threat, as seen for
example in Nicod’s (1974) research, as the felt need to improve working-class diets.
While disorder provides a sense of danger and a threat to the system, it is through the
incorporation of disorder as new order that the system is able to progress. This
movement, generated by disorder, is particularly important in establishing the
trajectory of a ‘hot’ society. While the role of disorder may be interpreted as danger,
with the threat seen as primary, disorder’s function is not to overthrow the existing
order but to offer the potential of change while maintaining the hegemonic status quo.

Food itself can be seen not only as a communicator of existing order but also as an ambiguous element within that system of order. Specific foods are readily recognised as ambiguous and disordered because of their physical characteristics; for example the pig in Mosaic Law. Food can also be read as an ambiguous symbol for another reason: it must cross a boundary between the world and the individual through a site, the orifice of the mouth, which in itself is viewed as an ambiguous symbol. Just as food must transgress the mouth, so too must speech, but travelling in the opposite direction, so that the mouth becomes a point of convergence of two directions and contradictions.

The structuralist tradition can therefore be seen to provide an appropriate set of analytical tools for decoding the complexity of McDonald’s as the notable food signifier of the late twentieth-century Western ‘hot’ society. Structuralism offers an understanding that food is an expression of both nature and culture, that it is structurally ambiguous. As a surface representation of culture, food has been shown to operate as a system of communication, a code for comprehending the deeper structures of social order, a means to meditate on the human being’s place and interaction with the world. Structuralism offers not only an account of order but also provides a useful theoretical insight into disorder. This thesis builds upon this recognition of disorder by positioning it as a vital part of a continuing and constitutive dialectic between order and disorder and as part of a duality of order. Taking a purposeful account of the trajectory Lévi-Strauss plots for a ‘hot’ society I address the limitation of a lack of history in the structuralist tradition. To precede, an exploration of this trajectory will enable McDonald’s to be positioned in history and to be interpreted as the “polysemy” food sign of late modernity.
Part 2--Key stages in the history of a meditation on Western food

To decode McDonald’s as one of the most dominant food symbols of the late twentieth century, we must address the acknowledged limitation that structuralism does not account for historical change. The thesis accomplishes this by setting McDonald’s into the intersection of two competing versions of the history of food, and of order as expressed through food.

This section of the thesis explains these two competing versions of history, revealing the existence of a duality of order (a top-down perspective and a bottom-up perspective of the existing social order) that draws upon the continual and constitutive dialectic between order and disorder. In each version of history the order/disorder dialectic plays a different historical role.

In the first narrative (top-down) we witness, primarily through the work of Norbert Elias’s (1994) *The Civilizing Process*, the slow triumph of the bourgeois order and the increasing rationalisation of order. As a counter-narrative, Bakhtin’s (1984) (bottom-up) theory of the carnivalesque folk culture, as outlined in *Rabelais and his World*, is used to advance the centrality and continuing relevance of disorder.

A trace of the history of food, and of order expressed within these two competing narratives by food across modernity, is achieved by exploring two significant moments in food history. These specific moments are selected because they can be understood to represent the key points of intersection of the two competing narratives. The first, the sixteenth-century, uses Bakhtin’s source material (the books of Rabelais) as a key text, positioned at the interface between medieval ‘disorder’ and the coming bourgeois order of modernity. The second uses the early nineteenth-century work of Brillat-Savarin (1970), which reveals the triumph of eighteenth-century rationalism and sets the tone of modern gastronomic thinking and eating.
Chapter 2--The slow triumph of the bourgeoisie

History, process and change in a ‘hot’ society

Lévi-Strauss (1966b) argued that change is a defining and internally prized feature of our Western ‘hot’ society. The image of our society is in part an acknowledgement of a particular representation of how our society experiences change, expressed as a relationship to linear time. Viewing past and present on a single continuum, time is expressed as a cumulative sequence, each instant generated from the previous one and heralding the subsequent. McDonald’s interpretation as one of the most dominant food symbols of the late twentieth century needs to be accounted for by its relationship to historical change. While structuralism has furnished the tools to decode McDonald’s as a form of communication and as a surface representation of the deeper structures of social order, the criticism levelled at the structuralist approach (Goody, 1982, p. 33 and Mennell, 1985, p. 13) that structuralism is limited by an inadequate explanation of observed changes in our food behaviour, needs to be more fully addressed.

This quandary - and acknowledging the importance of change given structuralism’s lack of an adequate explanation - can in part be understood by recognising the focus on mapping order, or the status quo. This by necessity produces a ‘snapshot’ that is constrained and provides a limited representation that is perceived as frozen in time, devoid of a sense of the dynamic that is inherent in the dialectic between order and disorder. Structuralism inability to explain change adequately, Mennell (1985, p. 13) argues, (first quoting Goody, then Elias), is the result of a phenomenon that Elias labelled ‘process reduction’. Mennell explains this phenomenon as the desire in Western thought to look behind the change and look for static structures that underlie the changes that we can observe.

The theoretical base for Mennell’s (1985) own exploration of food as a sign of cultural and historical development is introduced as the principle in a historical narrative. Its purpose is to inform the structuralists’ approach, and it helps to
overcome that approach’s acknowledged limitations, and addresses Mennell’s criticism. His work is strongly informed by that of Norbert Elias.

**Theorising social change – The civilising process**

In *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias (1994, p. xi) addresses both the type of change and the cause of this change, as he charts the rise of the bourgeoisie and the increasing rationalisation of order in European society. Elias begins by making the observation that “If a member of present-day Western civilized society were to find himself suddenly transported into a past epoch of his own society, such as in the medieval-feudal period, he would find there much that he esteems “uncivilized” in other societies today.” This suggests that “Western man has not always behaved in the manner we are accustomed to regard as typical or as the hallmark of “civilized” man.”

To explore the phenomenon of change, and answer the question “how did Western man become ‘civilized’,” Elias maps transformations of human behaviour from the thirteenth century through to the nineteenth, in a number of everyday fields - including behaviour at table. His work is based on close observation of texts of instructional etiquette and the writings of men such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, who published for an intended, aspirational audience and believed they needed to learn how to behave correctly. This genre of literature bears witness to Douglas’s (1966, p. 3) concept of the instrumentality of pollution, with the socially dominant prescribing behaviour designed to enforce good citizenship. Elias’s particular choice of literature proves both illuminating and restricting. The literature provides a record of change, each reference a static representation in time with the then desired order. Cumulatively, these documents provide an accelerated trace of change. This, Elias concedes, unfortunately serves to mask the actual gradual nature of change that occurred in each particular everyday activity, in its use as a means of social differentiation. Selecting this genre of literature also conceals the complexity of society by focusing on the desired order portrayed, to satisfy the aspirational traits of a particular stratum. This class-based restriction provides an overly simplified representation of the dialectic between order and disorder, and unfortunately
constricts Elias’s understanding of the dynamics of change to one filtered by specific class consciousness.

This simplification is evident in Elias’s (1994, pp. 95-99) example of the type and direction of change in food habits described in “On the eating of meat”.

“In the middle ages, people move between at least three different sets of behavior towards meat” (Elias, 1994, p. 96). These different models of behavior, Elias ventures, are linked to class structure. The secular upper classes enjoy an extraordinarily high consumption of meat by modern standards. Conversely, in monasteries an ascetic abstention from all meat-eating, based on self denial rather than an economic reason of shortage, was predominant. In the lowest class, the peasants, meat-eating was frequently extremely limited, not from a pious need but from a shortage of access. These stark differences in food behaviour are used by Elias to illustrate the diversity of behaviour that then separated and isolated the different classes of society. While the meat consumption of upper classes and of peasants is simply explained by their hierarchically different economic circumstances, the practice exhibited by clerics is more complex. Elias (1994, p. 96) notes consumption for clerics “ranged in varying degrees from asceticism to approximately the behavior of the secular upper class.”

The complexity that this ambiguous behaviour illustrates is not comprehensively addressed. The order of society is simplified, expressing a differentiation between classes but ignoring the complexity suggested by the construction, by some clerics, of an alternative and competing social order, a disorder in relation to the dominant order. Elias avoids the full impact that this challenging behaviour plays, ignoring the consequence it could have on other classes of society and how this disordered form of behaviour impacts the civilising process.

This illustrated differentiation of classes, based upon their levels of meat consumption, is expanded by reference to documented changes in how meat was brought to the table. This example also serves to illustrate the class bias that is inherent in Elias’s analysis, and how it provides little indication of influences or tensions between other classes relevant to this specific example. Elias declares that initially, amongst the upper classes, whole beasts were brought to the table and
carved, with the act of carving and distribution being an honour and an important skill for a well-bred man. In the seventeenth century, Elias notes, a change occurred amongst the French upper classes, with the carving of meat at table gradually ceasing. Elias contends that there had been a noted shift from the pleasure at the sight and carving of a dead animal at table, to an increasing sense of unease at the reminder of the killing and exact nature of the animal being eaten, the distasteful dissection now relegated behind the scenes.

This simple and class-biased example is then used by Elias as a key to unlocking the direction of change, which Elias terms ‘the civilising process’, marking progress towards an explanation of a motive for why these changes occur. Taking his observed phenomenon from the upper stratum, Elias generalises the process across the full stratum of society. The increased repulsion that people feel of the animal form is, for Elias (1994, p. 98), evidence that people “seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic that they feel to be ‘animal.’ They likewise suppress such characteristics in their food.” Here Elias, despite the limitations, is echoing the sentiments of Lévi-Strauss and his deep structure, by suggesting that there is a perceptible movement, a distancing away from the binary pole of nature towards that expressed in the opposite, culture. This use of the same binary and similarity of trajectory between Elias and Lévi-Strauss cannot be coincidental.

The structure of order

This analysis, based upon class categories and their referencing to the primary binary, is extended by Bourdieu (1984, pp. 193-200) who observes in bourgeois and working-class consumption:

two antagonistic approaches to the treatment of food and the act of eating. In one case, food is claimed as a material reality, a nourishing substance which sustains the body and gives strength (hence the emphasis on heavy, fatty, strong foods, of which the paradigm is pork – fatty and salty – the antithesis of the fish – light, lean and bland); in the other, the priority given to form (the shape of the body, for example) and the social form, formality, puts the pursuit of strength and substance in the background and identifies true freedom elective asceticism of the self-imposed rule.
And it could be shown that two antagonistic worldviews, two worlds, two representations of human excellence are contained in this matrix. Substance – or matter – is what is substantial, not only ‘filling’ but also real, as opposed to all appearances (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 197-9).

Bourdieu’s two categories of cuisine illustrate the workings of categories. Each category is seen to exhibit a defined set of core and peripheral values that derived meaning not from itself but from the relationship with the opposing category. Contained within that sense of order is reference, through a system of interconnectedness, to the broader web of related categories used to express self-identity and sense of place. Class is ordered by consistent representation, generated not at a rational conscious level but at the unconscious, formed in relationship to other classes, with order both providing structure and in turn structuring society in its own image. Classification brings not only order but also provides a sense of identity, with its own prescription of behaviour and expectation. Categories offer either a sense of inclusion or conversely exclusion, thus helping to create the concept of the ‘other’. Finkelstein (1989, pp. 28-9) uses these principles of ordering to construct a typology of three main classifications of dining out (Fête Spéciale, Amusement and Convenience), comprising seven categories of restaurants ranked hierarchically and based on a notion of grandeur, from fête spéciale down to the unpretentious fast-food chains and local ethnic restaurants. This restaurant hierarchy can be seen to be referenced to the primary binary, taking its trajectory from the value system that venerates culture over nature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fête Spéciale</th>
<th>Amusement</th>
<th>Convenience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Parodic</td>
<td>Café mundane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Bistro mondain</td>
<td>Fast-food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Local ethnic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Finkelstein, 1989, p. 72)

Figure 2. A Typology of Restaurants

Categories of order are framed by conceptual boundaries that mark the interface of order and disorder. These boundaries are important in structuring order, separating the infinite number of elements in the world into comprehensible sets of
differentiated conceptual groupings. Categories can be highly nuanced and fluid, creating infinite groupings of inclusion and exclusion, each category embracing a configuration of beginning, middle and end. In doing so, boundaries create frames around recognisable categories of classification, but simultaneously they also mark sites of ambiguity or disorder associated with the fluctuating points of transformation between one category and that of another. Boundaries by their definition have to encompass simultaneously elements that signify both categories, and therefore can only be read and interpreted with a degree of ambiguity. As Elias (1994, p. 96) suggests, it is at points of interaction, boundaries such as those he observes between classes or regions, that change occurs, providing the stimulus for the civilising process.

It is the order/disorder dialectic inherent in social hierarchies, experienced at the boundaries between categories and coupled with the trajectory provided by the primary binary (nature/culture), which provides the energy for change, as order is continually challenged to redefine categories by a process of inclusion or exclusion of material. This phenomenon provided the motivation for the production of the literature on manners, that formed the historical profile used by Elias (1994). This ordering principle is then extrapolated consistently, by application of the social hierarchy binary identified by Bourdieu (1984) of dominant over dominated, with construction of order in a form that supports and legitimates the hegemony. Here order is constructed downwards along the hierarchy, developed in relationship to the value system expressed by the elite in a society. Mennell (1985, p. 187), despite his criticism of Lévi-Strauss’s comparison of French and English cuisine, concedes the existence of a French gastronomic hegemony. Social hierarchies are ordered in such a manner to hold out the promise that change is possible. This principle of possible change is clearly evident in both Elias (1994) and Bourdieu (1984), in their examination of the motivation of the middle-class, who are reliant on aspiration to shape their social position and lifestyle, and their perceived ability to change their position in upward directions relative to the status quo. This motivational force and belief in change may, however, prove to be largely illusionary, as order reproduces itself in such a way that hierarchies are maintained to replicate the hegemony.
Bourdieu (1984) provides a rich ethnography of the structuring properties of these social hierarchies and the struggle for differentiation. Drawing on the work of Elias, Bourdieu sets out to map, using axes of economic and social capital, the universe of lifestyles expressed in French society. It is in the examination of the broader class structure, particularly working-class ideals, where Bourdieu advances the legacy of Elias by highlighting the complexity generated by competing and conflicting constructs of order. Bourdieu maintains that taste is a function of class in a stratified society, describing how everyday practices such as food habits are constructed to represent an expression of one’s ‘self’ and class identity. In the example of the two cuisines (bourgeois and working-class), Bourdieu demonstrates how these are constructed in opposition to each other and referenced to other hegemonic expressions of affiliation. Bourgeois food is concerned with individual aspiration, communicating a concern for outward appearance and asceticism, based (form) on a self-imposed rule of restraint, an expression of Elias’s self-regulation and delicacy. Alternatively, working-class cuisine as a sign representation of the collective mass, is viewed as hierarchically lower from the perspective of the bourgeoisie, due to the focus on substance (function), linking the body closer to nature. This is a replication of the values expressed by the primary binary.

These values, as expressed by Bourdieu, are also developed in various guises by Elias (1994), Mennell (1985) and Finkelstein (1989). Male professional restaurant cooking is valued over female domestic cooking, city over country, restraint or moderation over gluttony, or quality over quantity. Mennell (1985) even uses jobs in the catering trade and their status to demonstrate the mind/body binary of management/mind over chef/hand, or the debate that surrounded chefs defined as artists as opposed to workers, to illustrate the ordering principle of social hierarchies. These examples illustrate ways by which the order is created and how social differences can be used to communicate expressions of the ‘self’ through cultural ritual such as eating.

Food habits depicted as a cultural display in Elias and Bourdieu demonstrate a sense of order that bears witness to the political history of France and its aristocracy, thus providing an illustrative example of the society’s relationship to its own history. Charting behaviour at table across the epoch, Elias noted that changes in eating
behaviours reflected wider social changes. Elias (1994, p. 85) suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century, in terms of eating habits, the French upper class had reached a standard that would form the general measure of eating manners for the whole of civilised society, thus setting in place the French gastronomic hegemony noted by Mennell.

By the nineteenth century Elias (1994, p. 85) suggests that the process of civilisation was perceived as having been largely completed by the upper and middle-classes, and the only people waiting to complete the process were other nations and the lower classes. For Elias, the concept of what it is to be civilised is relative and is viewed in relationship to what is or was considered to be uncivilised. What emerged from the mapping process for Elias is that the rise in civility involves an increasing sense of shame and delicacy exhibited by the individual, and a corresponding escalation in the pressure to exhibit elevated levels of self-control, so as to not be viewed as socially inferior. Here, delicacy is based on the internalised feeling of embarrassment but this feeling may be later subject to an external ‘rational’ explanation. For example, Elias suggests that the reason soup is no longer eaten from a common bowl is not based upon an increased threshold of embarrassment, but rather one rationalised as Douglas (1966, p. 29) also suggested, by a medical materialism, and is now deemed ‘unhygienic’.

**Self-control, violence and order**

Elias’s perception of broad social changes makes a direct correlation between the transformation of manners and the progressive change in the organisation of the state. While recognising a consistent change in order in these two spheres, Elias stops short of the declaration that there is a coherent order to society. Changes in manners, with an increased level of self-control, are linked to the move from an extremely decentralised feudal society of the early Middle Ages, populated with numerous greater and lesser warriors as rulers, to an increasingly centralised and monopolistic form of government that we now recognise as the nation state. Central to his theory is the correlation between increased self-control and the threat of violence in society.
In feudal society violence was a necessary and localised part of everyday existence, with its legitimacy being vested in the aristocracy. With increasingly centralised governance, violence was removed from the everyday and its use vested in the middle-class dominated state bureaucracies. This change necessitated an increase in self-control, as exhibited by the individual, in exchange for perceived economic and social benefits. Mennell (1985, pp. 20-39) makes a similar case to Elias, suggesting that increased self-control was based on the reaction to an experienced greater level of security of existence. There had been social changes that delivered a more equal balance of power between social classes; coupled with these social changes, improvements to the food system delivered a more equitable distribution of food between classes and a reduction in the extremes of cycles that produced feast and famine. In relation to food, self-control and moderation were progressively required to deal with increased plenty.

The increase in self-control served to overturn instant gratification, thus providing a basis for other related behaviours that would serve to strengthen the sense of order experienced in Western society. Elias argues that in feudal societies the structure or chains of human relationships were more immediate and spread over a relatively minor geographical area. With the increased centralisation and investiture of force in the stable monopoly of the state, “the chains of action binding individuals together are longer and the functional dependency between people greater” (Elias 1994, p. 448). In return for a safer existence the individual becomes subservient to this notion of order, which requires their personal suppression of any passionate impulse:

The more threatened is the social existence of the individual who gives way to spontaneous impulses and emotions, the greater it is a social advantage of those able to moderate their affects, and more strongly is each individual constrained from an early age to take account of the effects of his own or other people’s action on a whole series of links in the social chain (Elias, 1994, p. 448).

This subservience to order by the individual, in return for social advantage, is witnessed in the example of the construct of linear time. Elias (1994, p. 457) offers the example that with the growth of fairly stable monopolies of force not hitherto experienced, extensive networks of commerce could be developed. To coordinate
increasingly complex webs of interdependencies over larger geographical areas it became necessary to refine the ordering mechanism, that of linear time and associated timekeeping devices, which could increasingly be used to harmonise interaction. Adherence to time requires a socialised subordination of immediate personal desire, an increase in self-control, to generate the desired collective order. “This is why tendencies in the individual so often rebel against social time represented by his own super-ego, and why so many people come into conflict with themselves when they wish to be punctual” (Elias, 1994, pp. 457-8).

For Elias the most substantial change in the structure of society and the state can be linked to the French Revolution. The aristocratic phase of power comes to an end (Elias 1994, p. 502), marking a symbolic transfer of power to the state and a rise in the dominance of the bourgeoisie and their middle-class values. Society has rewarded the upper and middle classes, offering a social advantage for their self-control and their postponement of desire for longer term gain, because this is consistent with the needs of establishing long chains of relationships. The aspiration to emulate nobles, once seen in the bourgeoisie, Elias (1994, p. 510) explains, was increasingly replaced by a self-confidence in their own middle-class values and behaviours, that initially sought to oppose courtly values. The final conclusion, however, is that of middle-class values becoming dominant. Virtue is seen to triumph over courtly frivolity. The values that Bourdieu labelled as characteristic of middle-class cuisine have risen to become emblematic of the dominant order in society.

**Dining out – self-control and order**

This transformation in the power relationship, with the rise in the bourgeoisie or middle-class, is discussed by Finkelstein (1989, pp. 13-4) and Mennell (1985, pp. 33-4) in light of restaurant dining. There is the existing desire by the bourgeoisie to emulate courtly models of food consumption, with its proliferation of petite, delicate and costly dishes, this desire consistent with the general movement towards delicacy and self-restraint identified by Elias. The desire is then complicated by differing approaches to the economics of conspicuous consumption, oscillating between the needed lavish display by the courtier and the desire to demonstrate economic rationalism by the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois ability for social differentiation may
be constrained by economics but Mennell argues that this is compensated for by the generated need to demonstrate heightened levels of discernment in the emerging form of gastronomic social capital. As a social phenomenon, the rise of the restaurant finds correlation with the rise of the bourgeoisie (middle-class) and the democratisation of culture, by providing a new form of stage that allowed the public display of newfound economic and cultural standing. Finkelstein (1989, p. 14) then narrows her focus from the ascendancy of the middle class to specifically examine “styles of human exchange and how the nature of civility in social relations has been influenced by the bourgeois values which relate to public conduct.” For Finkelstein (1989, p. 17), the restaurant acts as a diorama that highlights certain aspects of sociality by mounting them on a theatrical stage.

Drawing on her typology of differentiated restaurants, Finkelstein explores how each category of restaurant structures a different set of expectations, and frames a particular sense of order for the diner by providing license of behaviour that in turn structures the dining experience. Restaurants offer a stage that transforms a basic bodily function into an elaborate display of consumption and public performance. The physical space of the restaurant is thus an integral component of the total experience; as the space is consumed along with the food, creating emotions and social elements of distinction, the experience rises to the level of a commodity. Dining out thus becomes a convenient means to mark individual levels of distinction on both economic and social capital scales.

Finkelstein (1989, p. 5) advances her thesis that the construct of the restaurant produces a shaped set of behaviours within the individual, which she believes can be interpreted as an “uncivilized sociality”. “The artifice of the restaurant makes dining out a mannered exercise disciplined by customs that locate us in a framework of prefigured actions. Dining out allows us to act in imitation of others, in accord with images, in response to fashions, out of habit, without need for thought or self-scrutiny. The restaurant is a welcome architecture of human commerce because we are obliged only to perform de rigueur, thus we are relieved of the responsibility to shape sociality.” Dining out in this example is read as a means of publicly demonstrating the individual’s ability of self-control, their level of stature in the social hierarchy, and a willingness to be unthinkingly subservient to a particular
system of order. It is this unreflective practice that Finkelstein (1985, p. 5) considers a constraint on our moral development and thus a source of incivility.

**Change is inherent**

As shown in the previous chapter, the criticism of structuralism’s perspective of order as static is erroneous. The structuralist system of order is constructed in such a manner that change due to disorder is an inherent part of its system. The system contains a source of constant pressure to change. The long-term change in manners mapped by Elias is not planned change as part of a conscious rational development that has “resulted intentionally from the purposive deliberation of individual people” (Elias, 1994, p. 444), but simply a result of the construct of order in our society. The pressure to change can easily be witnessed in the simple example of the social hierarchy based on the age of individuals. Categories such as young/old, child/adult are generated, setting up a dynamic that must generate change to the system of order. The young are socialised into a paradigm of social order by the older members of the group, creating a hegemonic flow of order. This trickle-down or consciously directed pressure down is designed to produce in the young the desired sense of order that is supportive of the status quo. The young, with their advancing years, become increasingly ambiguous as they undergo a transformation from the category of child to that of adult. With this change they become increasingly competitive and aspirational, wishing to overturn the existing form of order represented by the older generation and replace it with themselves as the dominant group in the hierarchy, thus generating perpetual change in the society.

Here the change is generational. The studies of Elias, Mennell and Bourdieu each provide examples of change based upon class differences. In each study the aristocracy or elite are seen to set the standard for civility in their society. The bourgeoisie or middle classes are seen as trying to emulate the behaviour of the class above—not as a simple emulation but one of complex interplay, as Bourdieu’s study attests, fought out in the interaction between the social hierarchical scales of economic and social capital. The complexity of this hegemony, and the duality of order, can be viewed in the following example: Bourdieu (1984) cites the longrunning struggle and justification of ideals of those who seek ascendancy and
correspondingly a position of greater dominance, through a preferred accumulation of economic capital gained through commerce. This he contrasts with those of the intelligentsia and artistic community, who seek supremacy based predominantly on the accumulation of social capital. While the middle classes are aspirational in their desire to emulate the elite, the dynamic between these classes mandates that the elite maintain tension by social distance and position by finding innovative means of differentiation, thus further providing the system with an agent of change. This tension is an example of the constant dialectic between order and disorder, which remains obscured by the auto-annihilation property of order that seeks to remove the visibility and effect of disorder.

**Order creation by upward pressure**

As Bourdieu (1984, pp. 197-8) indicated, a philosophical divide exists between middle-class and working-class cuisine. Food habits could be seen to mark not only class divisions but were an expression of two very different and opposed, outlooks based on the form/function binary. When coupled with the power inherent between the dominant and dominated classes, this antagonism produces a moralising downward force which is naively aimed at a class of people, who are not driven by the same obligation to use food as a means of social differentiation on the corresponding upwards trajectory. Mennell (1985, p. 227) provides a commentary upon this moralising. “That the poor spent unwisely what money they had for food, that they were furthermore ignorant of nutrition, ignorant how best to cook their food, and generally lacking culinary taste and imagination is the frequent lament from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.” The extent of the moralising is not confined to conviction but is manifest in the zealotry of reforming action by chefs such as Alexis Soyer, who used not only personal instruction but also the ordering power inherent in literature to exert moral influence. For example, he “discussed the ‘General Ignorance of the Poor in Cooking’ at length in his *Shilling Cookery* (1854)” (Mennell, 1985, p. 227). Moralising is also evident in the class racism that predates but echoes the motivation behind Nicod’s research, expressed in the actions of middle-class ladies who sought to instruct the urban poor in proper taste and appropriate domestic cookery skills (Mennell, 1985, pp. 228-9). This moralising downwards ignores the construct of order at play in this situation.
Bourdieu (1984, pp. 177-98) explains that the construct of working-class cuisine in relationship to the cuisine of the bourgeoisie is not solely limited by differences based on the primary reason of an income differential. Working-class cuisine is also constructed in relation to middle-class cuisine through notions of order in the form of two opposing categories, based on binary opposition. “The art of eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working classes explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living. In the face of the new ethic of sobriety for the sake of slimness, which is most recognized at the highest levels of the social hierarchy, peasants and especially industrial workers maintain an ethic of convivial indulgence” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 179).

In the observation that the food habits of the working class explicitly challenge the bourgeois order, Bourdieu spotlights the complexity of the dialectic between order and disorder. Order is constructed not just in a linear relationship between the poles of the primary binary, as suggested by Elias’s study: order is constructed in a complex relationship that encompasses tensions between wider class categories, which are both aspirational and conflicting. In a display of aspirational drive, the middle classes seek to emulate higher order classes, causing the higher order classes to seek means to constantly differentiate themselves upward from the lower order classes. Order is also influenced by the purposeful rejection and creation of alternate forms of competing order and then the interplay between these rival orders. The interplay between order and disorder in generating change is more complex than is alluded to by Elias, who notably avoided dealing with the impact of the opposing working-class value system.

This creation of differentiation based on opposition also provides for interaction between the two categories. The moralising and hegemonic force downward in a society has been prominent but there is also evidence of an upward pressure, given inadequate credit for helping to achieve a facet of Elias’s diminishing social contrasts:

It is one of the peculiarities of Western society that in the course of its development this contrast between the situation and code of conduct of the upper and lower strata decreases considerably. Lower class characteristics are spreading to all classes. The
The fact that Western society as a whole has gradually become a society where every able person is expected to earn his living through a highly regulated type of work is a symptom of this: earlier, work was an attribute of the lower classes (Elias, 1994, p. 461).

This concept of the reshaping of order based on the transfer of pressure upwards has far-reaching consequences for society. It is important to recognise that lower class characteristics can be influential on higher classes, resulting in a change seemingly opposite to the direction of the civilising process, from interaction that is presented in the structure of a challenge—whether real or ritual.

Mennell (1985, pp. 30 & 32) proceeds in a similar vein, finding analogous meaning in the example of the enactment of sumptuary laws from the late Middle Ages as symptomatic evidence of this pressure from below to modify the behaviour, justified in the name of the common good, of the classes above. In this case the use of everyday items, such as food, acts as a means of social display and class differentiation. These laws also provide an early indicator of the rise of the power of middle classes and forewarn of the transfer of political power from the aristocracy to the State, heralding the later generalised democratisation of culture, including food. The creation of the mass market with the advent of industrialisation continued this democratisation, generating further upward pressure on social hierarchies and playing a part in diminishing the contrasts; in turn it generated a need to increase variety to maintain the hegemonic relationship between existing social categories.

Elias (1994, p. 398) expresses some concern at this increase in upward pressure, not only with the demise of the courtly code of conduct and its replacement with bourgeois social forms that were relaxed and in some ways more coarse; but also the conscious need to maintain society’s stability. This was reliant “on the one hand on the preservation of a certain balance between different groups, and a certain degree of co-operation and cohesion between the different interests of society; but it also depends on the persistence of sharp and permanent tensions and conflicts of interest between them.” These contrasts, Elias argues, must be balanced, reduced to a level that will ensure ongoing interaction and interdependence. The increased order produced by strengthening the chains of relationships that brought about the
diminished contrasts, Elias cautions, also has the potential to eventually lead to revolution. Initially the increasingly monopolistic state and this can be any monopoly such as state of rule or economic entity appears efficient, dragging smaller states along, as the monopoly of power intensifies; there is however the potential for increases in tension between the holders of the monopoly and those excluded from control. With growth, the monopoly is increasingly reliant on ever-increasing numbers of dependents to maintain its position, changing the power relationship by shifting the dependency to the monopoly being dependent on its dependents. The greater the complexity and length of chains of social relationships, the greater the risk of a bottom-up threat. Elias is most clear in this argument when tracing the consolidation of rule observed in feudal society. The movement from numerous seats of feudal rule to an increasingly monopolistic and centralised monarchy is matched by an increase in the chains of dependency and a rise in the power of the bureaucracy. With this shift of power from aristocracy to the bourgeoisie there was increasing potential for threat from below. This concept was eventually played out in the French Revolution with the overthrow of the monarchy and the rise to power of the bourgeoisie.

**Disorder and the creation of order**

Elias’s insight into the workings of society reflects the functioning of Lévi-Strauss’s ‘hot’ society. For Elias (1994, pp. 505-7) there has been a gradual shift in the order, and thus correspondingly, by definition, disorder, where “the mode of conduct of a small circle spreads to larger rising classes.” The phase illuminates the political relationships where the larger lower classes are understood as inferior and governed by the example of the established elite, a group which intentionally or unintentionally permeates its own marked conduct onto the lower group, until a phase where the rising classes command an increase in social power and self-confidence. Here we see a change in the pressure differentials expressed in social hierarchies. This change opens up the possibility of a threat from below. Elias draws examples of the formation of the nation state to caution that any monopolistic source of power, including modern day economic examples, runs the same risk as the French monarchy. His warning has credence as we trace the clearly distinguished shift in power from a model centred on European aristocracy to one where the USA, with its
prevailing middle-class values and its economic paradigm, is increasingly the dominant power in Western society.

Americanisation as a value can thus be understood as increasingly monopolistic, perceived to be spreading globally, broadening the dependence and further demonstrating diminished contrasts by the colonising of other cultures, spreading a value system that while incorporating certain values of others makes society more homogeneous. While expressing concern in relationship to this rise of bottom-up power, Elias remains on the verge of acknowledgment that not only does a desirable level of disorder provide energy to the system by driving the civilising process, but a similar desirable level of disorder may also provide a brake, holding the system to account and preventing a collapse of the existing order.

Disorder remains an inherent and vital part of our construct of the order existing not as a diametrically opposed opposite to order, but located at the margins as a frame or boundary to any category of order, embodied with regenerative power and a sense of danger, equipped to generate change in what amounts to stagnant order. This disorder does not have to be significant to perform its function. The need for written advice in the realm of manners serves to highlight the perceived danger that disorder plays--even very minor disorder--to the stability of society. The minor threat presented by disorder in the realm of manners, such as not knowing the correct behaviour at table, proved a catalyst for a whole genre of literature, produced in an effort to diminish the danger. This seemingly trivial threat illuminates that the concept of disorder is relative to the equilibrium of the society. For example, in a stable society disorder of a relatively minor nature, such as not knowing how to behave at table, attracts attention and is afforded high levels of symbolic power. In unstable societies the level of disorder required to attract the same level of attention is subsequently higher. This notion is correlated with Elias’s thesis of increased self-control linked to the threat of violence as a means of control.

The intensification in self-control that characterised increased order also works to decrease the individual’s observable swings of emotion. Any display of emotion is increasingly seen as a threat of disorder. This leaves the individual with a sense of ambiguity generated by the tension created between self-control and libidinal
impulses. Bourdieu (1984, pp. 179-8) observes this sort of tension in bourgeois food habits that are based on self-control, deferring bodily pleasure for an expression of form, while working-class cuisine embraces a spontaneous materialism. This is particularly evident in the realm of drinking where sobriety is contrasted with convivial indulgence. The effect of this difference is to instigate a process that will eventually lead to some form of change.

The change can be brought about by the moralising stance and downward pressure toward working-class cuisine. This can be seen in the examples offered by Mennell (1985, p. 227), who laments working-class diets or as evidenced by the agenda of the Department of Health and Social Security, that steered the research conducted by Nicod. This applied pressure provides indication of the threat of disorder expressed by working-class food habits, and evidences the predictable response of order in trying to change by neutralising this perceived disorder. Simultaneously with the applied neutralising force on the disorder there is an effort to challenge the increasing monopoly of bourgeois cuisine. This pressure on working-class cuisine—or any particular element of the system—as disordered must be viewed as political, as disorder is not located in the elements themselves, but only in expression of the element relationship to other elements of the system and the hegemonic notion of what is constituted as order.

_Nouvelle cuisine as an example of disorder_

A downward moralising pressure to change a perceived disorder finds a resonance in the converse, where upward pressure generates change. These changes are not true revolutions: they do not overthrow the monopoly of the past but rather provide a spurt, a movement in the direction of civility. In the 1960’s in France there emerged a new style of restaurant cooking, found in the work of young chefs such as Paul Bocuse, the two Troisgros brothers, Michelle Guérard, Roger Vergé and Raymond Oliver, that presented a challenge to the old order, playing out a pluralism identified by Curnonsky (1958, pp. 188-90 in Mennell, 1985, pp. 328-9) between the extreme right group, represented by devotees of the _grande cuisine_, and the extreme left, devoted to innovation and culinary exoticism. While each chef displayed his own individual style, the food writers Herri Gault and Christian Millau, in a 1973 article
titled *Vive La Nouvelle Cuisine Française*, claimed ten common principles or rules that characterised the ordering principles of this innovative and aesthetic ‘form’-driven style of cooking (Barr & Levy, 1984, pp. 62-65, Mennell, 1985, pp. 163-4). This act of gastronomic writing codified the points of differentiation and disorder, and transformed these elements into structured order by documentation and codification.

This labelling of a new cuisine, Mennell reminds us, was not the first time the expression *nouvelle cuisine* had been applied to ‘revolutions’ in French professional cookery. “The same words were used in the 1740s for the new cookery of La Chapelle, Marin and Menon, and occasionally in the 1880s and 1890s for the work of the Escoffier generation” (Mennell, 1985, p. 163). In the 1960s, this new style from the group of young French chefs used inversions of existing cooking practices, but within the limitations of Douglas’s accepted ordering principles of a ‘meal’; for example, the younger chefs used reduction sauces under food—rather than sauces based upon a flour roux poured over the food—as a means to challenge the ‘Escoffier’ orthodoxy. This challenge from *nouvelle cuisine* to the stagnation of the existing order was particularly taunting. Rule 10 clearly advocated the desire for change: expressed simply, it was ‘invent constantly’.

Initially embraced by those seeking to use the social institution of high status restaurants to demonstrate their own social differentiation, in terms of both high economic and social capital, this innovation and thus disordered cookery, underwent a process of democratisation, as it spread more widely by a trickle-down effect: “Like the ideas of Carême and Escoffier before it, the influence of *nouvelle cuisine* has spread around the world, to Western Europe, the USA, and even Japan” (Mennell, 1985, p. 164).

Bourdieu (1984, p. 254) cites a similar example to that of the young chefs seeking to challenge the existing order while simultaneously creating their own social status. This is active embrace of disorder by artists and intellectuals who produce work that is presented as a challenge to bourgeois sensibility, and as such provides a means of symbolic statement by positioning the individual near the boundary of order—thus attracting to them significant symbolic distinction granted to elements of disorder.
This tactic is limited by constant incorporation of disorder into the equilibrium of order, the position tenable only by engagement in a process of constant differentiation that generates change.

While *nouvelle cuisine* sought purposely to challenge the existing order of French restaurant cuisine, it did so from within the limitations as identified by Finkelstein’s thesis and within the hegemony of French cooking. *Nouvelle cuisine* was a challenge to the existing food, not an attempt either to overthrow the concept of the restaurant or to challenge the superiority of French cuisine. Barr and Levy (1984, pp. 64-5) interpret the effects of this challenge as a far-reaching coherent but complex challenge on the existing hegemonic order:

The cooking of the industrial revolution was over. The North had lost. The sunnier Catholic and Eastern countries had won the battle of the estomac. The cooking methods most suited to coal were out. Beef, the top meat of the west, was out. Even veal was out. The animal fats and flour that fuelled you through cold winters were out. The long cooking that softened tough old meat was out. Point said nothing should be on the stove in the morning – you have to start from scratch.

What had come in were Third World methods of cooking and Third World ingredients like prawns. Oysters, the raw treats of old cuisine, were cooked in the new. Out, sacred cows! Patience and long maturing were over. Farmers didn’t have to keep animals or poultry till they grew up, cooks didn’t have to spend hours trimming meat for stews. Meat had lost its importance altogether, because it’s boring to cook. Fish is the favourite of all nouvelle cuisine chefs. The food shops’ profit shot up when nouvelle cuisine came in – no more converting cheap ingredients into something delicious by care and cooking. The ingredients have to be young and expensive.

The French gastronomic hegemony was not only changed by contact with internal French disorder, but also subject to change from the international experience of young chefs adopting cooking techniques and ideals that had their roots in Japanese and Chinese cooking. This fusion and the extent of the disorder is made more interesting in light of comments made by Lévi-Strauss (1972, pp. 86-7); his rhetorical question asks whether his scheme of ‘gustemes’ could be equally applied to French and Chinese cuisine. The incorporation and transgression of Asian cooking technique into French cuisine has served, through disorder, not only to generate
change but has also assisted in the process of a cultural democratising, evident in diminishing contrasts.

In Mennell’s (1985, p. 164) closing statement on *nouvelle cuisine* we find recourse to the process of auto-annihilation as a means of the system of order dealing with any possible threat posed by disorder:

Perhaps it is unavoidable that as its ideas are adopted by lesser talents in less liberal contexts, nouvelle cuisine too will undergo routinisation and become a dogma. Already in the mid-1980s, some writers have detected signs of its exhaustion.

The initial challenge to the equilibrium of order, expressed by the novelty of and elements of inversion employed by *nouvelle cuisine* to create its sense of disorder has been abated with the imbalance dealt with, and the tension in the system has been reduced by incorporating the disorder and forming a new level of equilibrium. It is this process of incorporation--into existing categories of order of formally excluded disordered elements--that drives ‘hot’ societies to seek out the ambiguity of disorder, providing opportunity for reflection and growth in an otherwise stagnant order.

**Dissatisfaction and disorder**

Despite the social gains generated by the civilising process, disorder can manifest itself, particularly in the middle classes (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 253), in the guise of a general sense of dissatisfaction, a by-product of the constant aspirational drive inherent to the civilising process. Finkelstein (1989, pp. 116-20) suggests this dissatisfaction is a result of the gap between our expectations and our experienced reality of everyday life. In our consumer society, social position, as Bourdieu (1979) established, is the result of an exercise of taste increasingly made visible through material pursuits. Using the restaurant as an example, Finkelstein (1989, p. 118) argues there is an irony in trying to fulfil your desires in a social institution that is in the business of promoting further desire. In this situation, the order generated by this attempted satisfaction of desire structures a relationship that links the individual subserviently to these social agencies.
While in general dissatisfaction with life is traded, through a subservience to order, for a sense of greater security, and a rise in the standard of living for an increased percentage of community, some individuals will reflect on this rationalisation of order and question its validity. One strategy to combat the dissatisfaction can be found in the actions of inverted snobbery taken by some individuals, constructing for themselves social capital in a manner that expresses an opposition to the speed of change and the trajectory of modernity, effectively trying to apply a brake to the formation of a monopoly.

Mennell (1985, pp. 221-2) cites one such example of this type of response. As a reaction to increasing industrialisation and urbanisation in the early twentieth century, there was an attempt to reclaim and rescue the glory of the English ‘farmhouse’ tradition of cookery before these skills became lost. Elias (1994, p. 497) adds to the understanding of this phenomenon, by explaining the change in perception seen in the manner in which an urbanised society changes its sensitivity toward the rural landscape. No longer confronted with the harsh everyday reality of rural existence, the landscape can now be differentiated and transformed by a more Romantic ideal. This inversion does not however alleviate the generation of dissatisfaction, given that the desire is now romanticised and focused on a selective set of desired elements, forming an idealised recreation of the past rather than factual representation.

**Disorder and the examined life**

This questioning of order is an important role of disorder in a society. Finkelstein (1989, p. 166), citing Elias, raises the issue of civility and the ‘paradox of manners’: on the one hand manners facilitate social engagement, and on the other they conceal our sentiments and moral position from others in the hope of personal gain. With our behaviour based upon the calculated projection of a managed image of the self aimed at the control of the other, civility has come to mean that the individual performs to the expectations of others to his or her own advantage.

This adherence to “manners becomes a form of social control which effectively maintains the life of the group but, at the same time, mannered conduct can stifle the
private intellectual struggles of the individual” (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 132). Life in a Western consumer society is lived at the superficial level, safe from the unexpected and untoward, with sensibilities blunted by a sensory overload, brought on by the stimulation perceived in a material ‘fantasy’ world that mixes entertainment and consumerism to provoke desire. Interpersonal relations, extended by the increased chains of relationships which are required to sustain this commerce, are governed by manners that embody high levels of self-control and are commoditised through value-laden appearances, judged by their display of economic consumption practices. Life is lived in a cage of rationalisation, lived in response to external control. Dining out illustrates this construct, a social institution providing an engineered pleasure, the sale of a designed emotional experience in the form of an act of conspicuous consumption, devoted to the pursuit of the fashionable, presented in the form of the novel but remaining subservient to order, the inherent incivility of the behaviour characterised by a lack of critical reflection on the nature of the experience. This pursuit of the fashionable may allow a sense of control over one’s environment, creating a ready means of social differentiation, but the material lifestyle is self-defeating, trapping us, leaving us dissatisfied, caught in the paradox of modernity, safe and secure but bored by the repetitive nature and maintenance of the status quo.

Finkelstein makes the case that subservience to order stifles an individual’s freedom to develop the internal resources to go beyond the status quo. It is in the conscious stepping outside order and the embrace of disorder that allows the individual to transcend the current and conventional, to grow as an individual. The examined life allows the individual to focus on the disparity between actual and apparent, by trying to understand the ambiguous position that humans construct for themselves between nature and culture and through the critical examination of society, against an articulated ideal. In this way the superficiality of modern life can be transcended. Disorder encourages the interrogation of order, questioning the political structure of the hegemonic and manipulative composition of order. Experience of disorder, even as Bourdieu (1984, p. 491) argues, citing Bakhtin (1984), experience gained through the purposeful ritual creation of disorder allows for the individual to develop and to act from deliberate choice, conscious of alternatives, rather than act unthinkingly, based upon an imposed desired response.
Conclusion

This historical narrative of social change, centred on Elias’s (1994) *The Civilizing Process*, charts a dramatic change in our society. Elias documents the slow rise of the bourgeoisie and changing nature of social order—principally the increased rationalisation of this order, a bourgeois order which he argues is characterised by an increase in self-control, moderation and the establishment of long chains of social relationships. The effect of this change is the trend toward a monopoly of power with a corresponding safety and predictability of living. The trade is subservience to this order.

This structuring of behaviour by subservience to order is highlighted by Finkelstein (1989), who uses Elias’s construct of bourgeois order and applies it to the particular dynamics of behaviours on exhibition in restaurants. Finkelstein reads the various categories of restaurants as a product of modernity, and their function as a commercial producer of desire, selling experience as a commodity. Restaurants can thus be seen to provide the bourgeoisie with a stage that offers, in exchange for subservience to its order, the opportunity to transform a bodily function into an elaborate display of consumption and public performance of behaviours that express mastery of bourgeois values.

It is this desire to project a socially desired ‘self’ that has ordered and constrained, by a class bias, Elias’s analysis. By constructing his argument from etiquette literature, Elias provides a limited top-down perspective of the history of Western society. Despite this limitation, the insight offered does serve to inform the structuralist perspective. In the unfolding of Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* we witness a construct of order consistent with that proposed by structuralism for a ‘hot’ society. There is evidence offered of society’s production of energy by the rationalisation of order, social hierarchies drawing energy from differentials created by the aspirational qualities intrinsic to the primary binary. Change is generated by each class’s drive to engage at its boundary and emulate the class above; this is counted with the drive to distance from the class below. It is this process of social differentiation which provides Elias with the force and direction for change.
Despite this insight and Elias’s recognition of the presence of ambiguity, Bourdieu’s work (1984) is required to develop the complexity of order that is inherent in Elias’s analysis, and to give voice to structuralism’s approach. Within the top-down construct of bourgeois order Bourdieu notes that there exists a duality of order, based on the differentiated preferencing of the competing values of economic and social capital. This complexity is compounded by recognition of the dialectic between order and disorder, based on the class hegemony that Bourdieu (1984) observes, so clearly marked by the differentiated food habits expressed by the cuisines of the bourgeoisie and the working class.

The insight provided by Bourdieu’s two cuisines opens up the complex function of the order to display the constant dialectic between order and disorder, and the duality of order that is lacking in Elias’s presentation of a top-down construct of order. Elias fails to account fully for the role disorder provides in not only fuelling ‘the civilising process’ by driving society forward, toward the binary pole ‘culture’, but simultaneously providing the brake on society by maintaining a link with the binary pole of ‘nature’. Elias’s model provides insight, but the historical narrative is limited as it does not fully recognise that change can be generated not only by ‘the civilising process’ but by an opposite force. It is Bourdieu (1984), by introducing Bakhtin (1984), who provides recognition of the presence of an analogous perspective, the existence of an alternative historical narrative, a bottom-up perspective.

Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* informs one version of history, helping to alleviate the limitations of the structuralist perspective. His narrative traces the slow triumph of the bourgeois order across modernity, and the increasing rationalisation of order that has helped shape McDonald’s as one of the most powerful food sign of the late twentieth century. Elias’s version of history highlights the role of order in the order/disorder dialectic. The ‘top-down’ perspective of order articulated by Elias now opens the way for Bakhtin’s counter narrative, a ‘bottom-up’ perspective that, by bringing disorder to centre stage, will help construct a duality of order. It is only when this continual and constitutive dialectic and the duality of order are fully developed that the ambiguity inherent in McDonald’s as a food symbol can be better appreciated.
Chapter 3--Prophet of disorder – Mikhail Bakhtin

Introduction

Structuralism’s inadequate account of the changes in our food behaviour has been addressed, by a historical account and explanation of change centred on Elias (1994). Drawing from instructional etiquette literature, Elias theorised a limited ‘top-down’ account of change in social order, where the increased rationalisation of order is seen to dominate. The perspective developed within this single history in privileging order, while useful, does not fully account for a continual and constitutive dialectic between order and disorder and the duality of order that is inherent in the structuralist tradition. Without a more comprehensive account there can be no progression toward the decoding of the complex of meanings communicated by rich culinary signs such as McDonald’s.

Bourdieu (1984) offers a second and analogous historical account of change, which focuses upon disorder as a major constructive element (rather than privileging order) and acts as a foil to Elias’s theory. By introducing the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and his book *Rabelais and his World*, Bourdieu (1984, p. 491) has instituted another layer of complexity, thus enriching the structuralist perspective. Where Elias had been content to offer a worldview dominated by the ‘civilising process’, a world dominated by the values of the bourgeoisie, Bakhtin offers an alternative that focuses on the values of folk culture. Drawing on the writings of the French physician, humorist and satirist François Rabelais (c. 1494-1553), Bakhtin presents a worldview that privileges popular folk culture and its position of defiant opposition to the serious official ecclesiastical or feudal hegemony of the Middle Ages. Where Elias had championed the role of order in relationship to society, Bakhtin takes the opposite tack. In Bakhtin we have an advocate for the power of ritual disorder as a challenge to hegemonic order and a generator of change. As Bourdieu notes, it is Bakhtin’s analysis of Rabelais that champions the strategy of the dominated to set about a redress of hegemony, through a process of reduction and degradation. The ‘values’ of the dominant groups are, through strategies of slang, parody, burlesque and caricature, turned topsy-turvy in an attempt to defeat the social division that
these values generate, and to institute a world of equality that is in touch with the physical pleasures of life. Here in this folk culture is a conscious effort to embrace rather than distance the values expressed by the binary pole nature.

Bourdieu (1984, p. 179) alluded to this same worldview when he spoke of the working-class art of eating and drinking as one of the few remaining areas of life that “explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living.” An open challenge to the ‘civilising’ trajectory, as charted by Elias, articulated a culinary expression of the desire by some sectors of society to overturn the order of the social hierarchy, and not to embrace culture but to be reminded of the nature of life. In the guise of convivial celebration, we witness the ritual embrace of disorder that salutes a freedom unrestrained by increased rationalisation of behaviour controlled by externalities. This freedom allows the civility of the examined life advocated by Finkelstein (1989), free and therefore worth living, governed by the ambivalence that comes from an embrace of nature and culture, and which places life within the cyclical sequence of birth, death and rebirth.

Implicit in this position is a recognition of the dialectic between order and disorder. The folk culture of Bakhtin and the working-class cuisine of Bourdieu do not stand in isolation but rather in direct relationship to the prevailing hegemony. The challenge to order is constructed in correlation to the existing order: inversion is used to elevate the opposite binary values, or transgression is used (as in Douglas’s concept of dirt as matter out of place) to generate ritual and symbolic disorder. This is achieved not by a rejection of order, but rather by knowledge and an understanding of the structuring principles of the hegemony, a recognition that change is inherent in the construct. Disorder is tapped to harness its potential, to ritually challenge the status quo, and to offer insight into the dangerous potential of change. This structural duality expressed by this symbiotic relationship between order and disorder finds lucid expression in the ritual traditions of Carnival and Lent. It was within the tradition of these festivals and the Rabelaisian world of Carnival that Bakhtin found the material to construct his expression of the creative life form that is disorder.
Carnival – festival of disorder

The Oxford Dictionary defines Carnival as “The season immediately proceeding Lent, devoted in Italy and other Roman Catholic countries to revelry and riotous amusement.” While the etymological roots of the word Carnival remain obscure (Eliade 1987), one theory links the word’s roots to *carrus navalis*, the horse-drawn, boat-shaped carriage that was paraded during Roman festivals to honour Saturn. Another theory links to a set of meanings that serve to highlight the symbolic importance that food played in delineating this festival, the word Carnival may be derived from the Latin *caro* (meat) and *levara* (to remove, to take away), which was corrupted to *carne levamen* and later to *carne vale*. Others see a link to *carnis levamen* (the pleasure of meat), the farewell of which is celebrated through its excessive consumption during the festival before the onset of the prohibitions of Lent.

This etymology points to the long history of this genre of festivals. In the ancient world, rituals drew on elements that we have come to associate with the tradition of Carnival. These were festivals that embraced disorder, where for a short time the world was turned on its head, relying on the practice of inversion and transgression, where order was overturned temporarily, under licence from the hegemony, replaced by disorder and harmony with dissonance. These were festivals where profanity is held to be sacred, a time of excess, overflowing emotion, joy and anger, kindness and cruelty, a period of paradox, a celebration of life marked by the annual cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

The history of Carnival offers a trace of the dialectic of order/disorder. The beginning of the Christian era sees Europe with its whirlpool of converging myths and legends; cults and religions gradually succumb to the conquering Roman legions. Rome, as a centralised power--an early example of the theory that Elias stated in regard to monopolies--began to export a great common dominator, Christianity, thus reducing some differences across occupied lands. The Holy Roman Church (Orloff, 1981) spread a rather transparent liturgical veneer over ancient pagan traditions and although this was not a smooth transition, the Church began to assimilate the perceived disorder of ancient paganism and to rebirth these practices, bearing new
Christian names and values into the new dominant order expressed by the Church. Despite the often draconian persecution by the new religion, the more base and disordered nature-oriented pagan elements could not be stamped out by the new order. Despite a thousand and more years’ battle by the Church, vital traditions of antiquity refused to die; notwithstanding the best efforts of auto-annihilation and rationalisation, rituals of disorder remain with us to this day.

While in the Middle Ages the Church was busy continuing its war on paganism, the ancient gods began to infiltrate the Church itself. Disguised as the fool, the spirit of Carnival entered the Church under the guise of “The Feast of Fools”, which set out purposely to make a mockery of the solemn Christian liturgy. Lasting twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany, this now seemingly bizarre celebration encompassed ritual of role reversal, mockery, grotesque masks, dancing, singing and the election of a ‘fool’s Pope’. The altar was converted into a banquet table, with the lower clergy eating greasy foods, drinking and playing gambling games. The festival reached its climax on January with the “Festival of the Ass” (Orloff, 1981).

This ritual of disorder, however, sat uneasily as a challenge to the order and sanctity of the Church. Opinions were divided: some zealously condemned the sinful excesses and blasphemies, seeking to have them stamped out, others in the Church saw the appropriation of the ancient pagan customs into the Church as necessary, and a healthy means to venting man’s pent-up foolishness. This ideological battle was played out symbolically within the Church, under the guise of the annual battle between the values expressed in the rites of Carnival and Lent.

These binary related ritual occasions, Carnival and Lent, offer a complex symbolic battleground that highlights the order and disorder dialectic and the duality of order. Not only is there a hierarchical challenge to the power of the Church expressed in the disorder of Carnival; there is also a display of the tension between the secular and spiritual order of society. By favouring the ritual of Lent, the Church is reinforcing ‘top-down’ the values that Elias (1994) identifies as central to his ‘civilising process’: moderation, self-control and subservience to hegemonic order. This expression of the rationalisation of order in a ‘hot’ society produces in turn its own disorder. Carnival, with its embrace of disorder, is ambiguous, readable as an
expression of the order/disorder dialectic, a bottom-up ritual, a challenge to the
hegemonic order of the Church, and simultaneously, as an expression of the duality
of order, a brake on the monopoly of the power of the Church, by licence from the
secular authority. While serving to hold order to account, the trajectory of society
identified by both Elias and Lévi-Strauss is set within the rationalisation of order,
serving to diminish the importance of Carnival.

But the spirit of Carnival survived; the ancient pagan ritual remained incorporated
into the ritual of the Church, helping to preserve and move these traditions forward.
The carnivalesque remained alive across Europe, weaving its spell of madness and
debauchery, and at the end of its period of wild excess, the spirit of Carnival stood
accountable, judged and condemned to death. Right across Europe, festivals
embraced the fool, grotesque imagery, birth and death, the banishment of winter.
Excess and licentiousness survived, often condemned or sanitized for an increasing
new sensibility. In the eighteenth century however the rate of change accelerated.
Order was triumphing. The age of revolution began to invert the existing social
order, the bourgeois was in ascendancy and with it Carnival began to die. “Carnival
and revolution have never mixed well, the one too serious, the other too frivolous to
see that their goals are identical” (Orloff, 1981, p. 45). Those carnivals that did
survive began to undergo a fundamental change, with the mass of people moving
from active participators to passive spectators.

Numerous writers (Turner, 1969, Cox, 1969, Orloff, 1981, Eco, Ivanov and Rector,
1984, Stallybrass and White, 1986, Falassi, 1987, and Gilmore, 1998) have tried to
decode this cultural manifestation and offer an interpretation of the meaning of
Carnival, carnival-type festivals and the central role that ritual disorder once and may
still play. Gilmore (1998, pp. 26-36) summarises the four distinctive--though
overlapping--theoretical approaches that have emerged to try to classify and decode
carnival-type festivities. These are “Structural – Functional Approaches, Dynamic
Equilibrium: The Ritual of Rebellion Approach, The Culture of Resistance: Marxist
Approaches and Interpretive – Symbolic Approaches.”

The seminal work in the field however remains that of the Russian writer Mikhail
a dramatic interpretation of how disorder functions within the Carnival context and how this is related to social order. It is worth examining Bakhtin’s theory in detail, as he remains the most prominent point of departure for writers in the field.

**A challenge to order: Bakhtin and *Rabelais and his World***

Like Rabelais, Bakhtin was a man of his time. Bakhtin’s writing, like Rabelais’, is part of a historical narrative that illustrates “the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial” (Holquist in Bakhtin, 1984, p. xvi). To comprehend Bakhtin’s work the reader must ground the work within the framework of the political and intellectual climate of the Soviet Union. Holquist, in the prologue to *Rabelais and his World* (1984), and Clark and Holquist (1984) set the context of Bakhtin’s analysis.

In this period, the Stalinist Government was actively trying to impose order upon its writers and intellectuals, pushing a doctrine of ‘socialist realism’ in the arts, directing literature to carry a message that advanced the party line, aimed at helping to produce a desired sense of social order. The traditions of folklore were to be coopted as a model to develop ‘new’ folk heroes who would serve the hegemony and highlight the qualities desired for the masses. This desired official portrayal of the ‘folk’ stands in stark relief to the view constructed by Bakhtin. Clark and Holquist (1984, p. 310) contrast these two perspectives. The first is the sanitised official Stalinist version of folk culture, which “excludes the culture of laughter and the marketplace with all its subversiveness, blasphemy, and blatant physicality. The result of this exclusion is a prettified, emasculated version of the folk, with no bite.” Bakhtin’s version was constructed in opposition to this Government-inspired and idealised paradigm, but is no less idealised. His folk are presented as wild, coarse, unpretentious, joyful, and possessed of the power to rise up against the forces of oppression to create a new, a better world.

The controversy that surrounded the submission and defence of his text as a doctoral thesis shows the extent to which Bakhtin’s portrayal of folk culture was at odds with the official Stalinist culture. The story of the doctoral submission and defence, coupled with the subsequent and ongoing criticism, offers valuable insight into the
dynamics of order and disorder. The focus was on decoding and categorising Bakhtin’s ambivalent text, a text that can be understood as a generational bottom-up challenge to the order of the status quo. Subsequent actions can be interpreted as a form of auto-annihilation to neutralise the perceived threat from the text as an element of disorder. Bakhtin’s thesis defence did not occur until 1947, delayed by a number of factors, significantly the outbreak of war. Bakhtin stood ready to defend his thesis about a French writer in a climate marked by post-war xenophobia. As state directives condemned ideological laxity, such as kowtowing to the bourgeoisie West, Bakhtin was labelled “guilty of the heresy of ‘formalism’” (Holquist in Bakhtin, 1984, p. xx). Bakhtin’s thesis was written in a similar vein to the writing of Rabelais, an open text capable of multiple messages and interpretations. Two distinct readings of the thesis emerged, both interpreted as a challenge to the official order. Bakhtin was understood both as a challenge to Rabelaisian scholarship and to the Stalinist State.

As a challenge to existing Rabelaisian scholarship, Pan’kov (2001) recounts the controversy and the objections levelled at the work, criticisms that have remained. The strength of the work was in its originality; this was also responsible for the numerous perceived shortcomings. Falling outside the established order of Rabelaisian scholarship, the thesis exhibited traits that are associated with disorder within the tenet of the traditional canon. Bakhtin, as a student, sought to challenge and was seen to be challenging the existing order of Rabelaisian scholarship. The lasting strength of this reaction can be seen in the more recent quote that follows: the noted Rabelaisian scholar Professor M.A. Screech (1979, p. 479), in his book on Rabelais, relegates Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World to the following brief note in the bibliography “written when the author was cut off from Western studies – useful if treated with caution: Russian text, Moscow 1965.”

Other criticisms take the view that Bakhtin deals in an idealised and somewhat utopian ideal of popular culture and Carnival, his analysis ignores the detail of Rabelais’ books, thus leading to Bakhtin’s work being viewed as political, a covert attack on the Stalinist state. This criticism must be read as both simultaneously unfair and well-founded. From the beginning Bakhtin argued ambiguously in his approach to Rabelais. The introduction to the book sets out that “Rabelais’ illuminative role in
this respect is of the greatest importance. His novel must serve as a key to the immense treasury of folk humour” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 4). He then contradicts this view later in the introduction, by suggesting “the immediate object of our study is not the culture of folk humor but the work of Rabelais” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 58). For Pan’kov there is no doubt that what emerges from examining the transcripts of the thesis defence is Bakhtin’s clear and unambiguous expression of his preference for the festive-grotesque forms of popular culture.

These forms of popular culture are the central focus of the work, not Rabelais himself, who is only a means of illumination. This said, Bakhtin offers a new and insightful perspective on Rabelais that has had a dramatic and lasting impact upon Rabelaisian scholarship. This contribution has been overshadowed by the political nature of the work, which has attracted a more widespread attention. The strength of Bakhtin’s work lies in the harnessing of the concepts of Carnival and the carnivalesque to explore not just the medieval or the Renaissance festival in which Rabelais’ books are grounded, but their wider application as a counter-narrative to that offered by the hegemony. In this way, it explores popular culture in a variety of forms throughout history.

It was in this guise—the dissertation’s decoding of Stalinist culture rather than only Rabelais’ work, that Bakhtin progressed to seriously challenge the official order. Using a series of binary opposites to explore culture, Bakhtin contrasts the official ‘high’ culture with the ‘low’ of popular folk culture, as drawn from the writing of Rabelais. The idealised government version of folk culture is thus contrasted to Bakhtin’s inverted and idealised version of folk culture. The two ideologies are depicted as reflecting each other, and so are open to comparison. This use of symbolic polarities is, Stallybrass and White (1986, p. 16-17) contend, a major strength of Bakhtin’s work. Bakhtin’s understanding that the opposites work symbolically, and are reliant on the shared relationships parallels the work of Lévi-Strauss and binary oppositions; Bakhtin’s recognition of the potential of symbolic inversion also mirrors Douglas. Significantly, however, Bakhtin’s work appears earlier and is independent of the advent of structuralism. While Bakhtin has used structuralists’ tools, the focus on the regenerative nature of Carnival has quelled any criticism that his construct of order is static.
Clark and Holquist (1984, p. 314) argue that the context of the writing was ordered by the setting of a Stalinist Soviet Union. The significance of this is further evident in Bakhtin’s use of popular catchphrases, “the people are immortal” or the “the new and better future.” Here, like Rabelais, Bakhtin constructs as a bricoleur, using the discourses drawn from other ideologies to build and advance his new thesis while still retaining traces of past meaning. Using official ideas of the time and the dialectic of order and disorder, Bakhtin is able to enter into a multifaceted dialogue with and against Stalinist policy, a practice reminiscent of Rabelais’ own social commentary.

This ambiguous dialogue continues to fuel the question: should the work be read as anything more than an attack on cultural life under Stalin? (Dentith, 1995, p. 71). This question underpins a criticism originally aired at Bakhtin’s dissertation defence: should the work be interpreted as a critique of Rabelais or of the Stalinist Soviet Union? While Clark and Holquist demonstrate that this work can be and is often read as an allegorical work of political criticism, the question remains, does the work offer more? Berrong (1986, p. 109), on examining Clark and Holquist’s argument, remarks, “his dissertation – or at least the writing of it – is among the most fearless in the history of literary scholarship,” and “as a critique of Stalinist policy, it remains a fascinating and admirable creation.” The force behind Dentith’s question and Berrong’s comment is identical: their expression is of an ongoing ambivalence, a dissatisfaction with categorisations of the work solely as a piece of Rabelaisian scholarship.

Screech’s dismissal (1979, p. 479), and confrontation, neutralise the threat of disorder posed by Bakhtin’s Rabelaisian scholarship. Bakhtin’s own criticism--that others have not fully understood Rabelais because of the context of their respective readings--is also levelled at Bakhtin himself. LaCapra (1983, p. 295) suggests that Bakhtin’s view of ‘low’ culture comes from the standpoint of a modern intellectual’s image of popular culture, drawn mostly from the ‘high’ cultural representation offered in literature. This, however, is unavoidable. Just as Elias’s selection of literature constrained his view so too has Bakhtin’s folk world of Carnival. Access is granted through the pen of the sixteenth-century writer who, through his own contact with the social experience of Carnival, has interpreted and then reinterpreted his
experience into the literary carnivalesque. This means that Bakhtin in the twentieth century can only begin to approach Carnival filtered first by Rabelais, and then only through the order created by existing Rabelaisian scholarship—a concern that Bakhtin raises about other Rabelaisian scholars but which remains inevitable from the perspective of Bakhtin’s own theories of reading the novel. Rabelais’ Carnival must remain distant, drawn not from lived social experience but from the literary form, the world of the popular read and interpreted across time, in another cultural setting, and accessible only to Bakhtin through the official construct of literature. Here there is inherent structural ambiguity, the disorder and ‘low’ of Carnival are only accessible through the order and ‘high’ of literature. This presents Bakhtin with a paradox: how does he make Rabelais meaningful to the twentieth century, while simultaneously releasing him from the construct of order as described by Elias? This construct of order would also inhibit Bakhtin’s own interpretation.

**Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World as counter-narrative***

The ambiguity related to the central focus of the book accentuates the complexity of the work, and explains in part the perception of disorder that surrounds the work. Central to the thesis is a purely theoretical examination of folk humour: “to show oneness and the meaning of folk humor, its general ideological, philosophical, aesthetic essence” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 58). This, Bakhtin argues, can be best achieved by examining the richest source of folk humour, the literature of Rabelais, which Bakhtin proceeds to describe as an encyclopaedia of folk culture. Bakhtin cautions that he does not wish to transform the writing of Rabelais into a vehicle for obtaining an objective external to the writing, but rather to use the theoretical investigation of folk humour to unlock the inner, ‘true’ Rabelais. Here we see Bakhtin argue that change of the human temperament, as identified by Elias, has stifled the reading of Rabelais. The consciousness developed by the civilising process has distanced—not just in terms of time but in sensibility—the modern reader from what Bakhtin sees as the true essence of Rabelais, leaving instead a reading focused on superficial elements of the work. Here the disorder of folk humour, which Bakhtin views as exemplary in the writing of Rabelais, has been constrained, subject to a subsequent censored interpretation from within the order of ‘high’ culture.
To unlock the essence of Rabelais, Bakhtin proceeds by attempting to use the key of traditional medieval folk humour. He contends (1984, p. 4) that the folk elements of laughter have been contorted by contemporary readings and thus misunderstood, with the inherent originality unexplored until the time of his own examination. Using the binary structure of official/non-official, Bakhtin positions the order of the European social world, setting an opposition between the serious official world, ordered by the values of the dominant, and a non-official second world of folk carnival culture standing outside officialdom. This is contrasted to the beginnings of civilisation, where Bakhtin (1984, p. 6) suggests that folk culture belonged to all people independent of their place in the social hierarchy, both worlds coexisting and intertwined but gradually separating, the duality now replaced by a folk culture reduced to a representation of the dominated. Correspondingly, carnival rites underwent a metamorphosis of meanings until they become the expression of folk consciousness. This separation remains evident today, in Bourdieu’s example of antagonism between the values expressed between working-class and bourgeois cuisine. Bakhtin rationalises the structure of order for the official/non-official binary by ordering it with the values of dominant/dominated; ‘high’/‘low’, which replicates the ordering structure of the primary binary of culture/nature. These coherent and consistent categories then form the base for Bakhtin’s analysis.

The recognition of the gradual separation of the double aspect of the world pays credence to Elias’s ‘civilising process.’ It also serves to highlight the deficiency of Elias’s focus on top-down order, which ignores the significant and vital bottom-up mechanism. It is in the complexity and ambiguity generated by the attempt to re-establish the dialectic between ‘high’ and ‘low’, order and disorder, that Bakhtin’s work finds meaning. This link is complicated and constrained by Bakhtin’s approach to medieval folk culture through the ‘high’ culture genre of literature. In the process of this separation of duality, folk culture is seen to gather its own momentum and own sense of order, developed by a process that mirrors the civilising process and strengthens the social hierarchy by differentiating sections of the populace.

To understand Rabelais, Bakhtin maintains, is to understand the folk culture of humour, the product of a thousand-year history. It is this history of folk humour in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance on which Bakhtin focuses his attention,
identifying two subtexts: Carnival, which is a social institution, and grotesque realism, which is a literary mode. *Rabelais and His World* then becomes a study of how the social and the literary interact (Clark and Holquist, 1984, p. 299). This interaction can therefore be understood as a manifestation of the dialectic between signs of disorder and order.

Rabelais portrays the realm of carnival as standing in opposition to the serious world of ecclesiastical and feudal culture, a boundless world of market-place laughter, comic rites, clowns, fools, giants and folk festivals. Within the disorder of folk culture Bakhtin (1984, p. 5) identifies three forms of manifestation that in spite of their variety interweave to make up the humorous aspect of the world of folk culture:

1. Ritual spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. Comic verbal compositions: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.

Bakhtin then begins to examine each of these separate forms in detail. Carnival pageants, rich with comic spectacles and humorous ritual, formed an important part of the life of medieval man. Comic presence enjoyed by tradition an integral part of most Church, state and agricultural celebrations. Most festivities, including church feasts, had at least some comic aspect. “Such, for instance, were the parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 5). But Carnival is not passive spectacle; it encompasses the culture of the marketplace. Carnival belongs, Bakhtin suggests, to a borderline between art and life, life shaped by a particular pattern of play:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7).
During these festivals there was a temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank, which led to an egalitarian sense of freedom that transgressed the bounds of the everyday.

This freedom enabled a behaviour that was liberated “from the norms of etiquette and decency and imposed at other times” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10), a licence to effectively and temporarily reverse the civilising process. Rather than a period of internalised personal restraint, Carnival was an exuberant public display of emotion. Carnival was a licensed public display of a particular form of disorder, a ritual challenge to the prevailing truths and authorities. A threat to the stagnation inherent in the status quo, Carnival demanded change and executed its role as a playful mechanism for reflection on what was and what could be.

For Bakhtin (1984, pp. 11-12), the defining element of this second life is the concept of a particularly complex form of laughter, an ambivalent laughter, festive, utopian and universal in its scope. This laughter can manifest itself in various forms of expression, spectacle, and literature, such as that exhibited within the works of Rabelais. The first manifestation is the focus of the laughter: it is laughter of the people directed at all, including the carnival’s participants themselves; it is self-deprecating, viewing the world through humour and simultaneously seeing a duality of good and bad. The second demonstrations of folk humour identified by Bakhtin are comic verbal compositions: parodies, both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular. This form of literature draws on a long history of writing that seeks to parody the official texts. Ancient Romans produced comic writings that reflected the licentious spirit of the Saturnalias. Later, Christian monks, clerics and scholars caught up in the carnival spirit produced texts that parodied the learned treatises. One of the older and more popular examples of this genre is the Cyprian supper (coena Cypriani), which offers a festive and carnivalesque travesty of the entire Scriptures (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 13). By the Middle Ages this style of writing was so widespread that it formed the mass of recreational literature. Even writers of the status of Erasmus indulged in this humorous genre.
The third form of articulation was various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons. This was the special type of communication created for the carnival. The speech reinforced the nature of informality and equality of Carnival by using speech patterns similar to those then found in the marketplace. Abusive expressions, insulting words or expressions came together in sometimes lengthy and complex forms to provide a language that mocked and transformed everyday language into one of laughter and ambivalence, that could carry forth the spirit of Carnival.

There is a gross physicality evident in the work of Rabelais, with its images of the human body passionately engaged in eating, drinking, defecating and sexual activity, providing a source of unease for some modern readers conditioned by the ‘civilising process,’ Bakhtin labels this gross physicality ‘grotesque realism,’ developing the concept as a central defining characteristic of comic imagery. The exaggerated bodily elements are viewed by Bakhtin as profoundly positive, but this portrayal of the body is not the body of an individual isolated man, the bourgeoisie’s “economic man” who seeks definition by emphasising the boundary between the internal body and the external realm of the world. No, this is an abundant cosmic collective of all people who travel the cycle of regeneration, birth, death and rebirth. Grotesque realism is a foil to the civilising process, formed by embracing the elements from which the civilising process seeks to distance itself. It is a movement towards the values represented by the binary pole of nature rather than those located in the direction of culture. Rather than aspiration, the central principle of grotesque realism is degradation. It is a degrading of all that is seen as a link to the cultural ‘high’, a return to nature and a link to the lower bodily stratum. This binary of ‘high’ and ‘low’ expresses and orders the cosmos, Bakhtin argues (1984, p. 21): “‘Upward’ and ‘downward’ have an absolute and strictly topographical meaning. ‘Downwards’ is earth, ‘upward’ is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, renascence (the maternal breasts).” Degradation is symbolically linked to the lower and transgressive parts of the body, the genitals, the stomach and buttocks, stressing a life engaged with the world and conceiving positive change. It is only when Bakhtin’s concept of the lower body stratum is viewed downwards through the eyes of the bourgeois sensibility that it loses its positive symbolic narrative and is narrowed to an interpretation that is simplistically focused on naturalistic and erotic images.
The grotesque realism of the pregnant body is symbolic of Carnival’s relationship to time and the process of change. An “as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 24) reflects a cyclical and temporal connection to time, standing in opposition to the dominant notion of change in ‘hot’ Western society that is manifest as a historical linear time. This tension is also a reflection of the two conflicting modes of thinking (pensée sauvage and modern scientific or ‘cultivated’ thought) identified by Lévi-Strauss (1966b). The dominant position of linear time in a ‘hot’ society allows the embrace of cyclical time as a legitimate means of challenging the hegemonic expression of order. The concept of Carnival time is, however, more complex. Participation requires stepping away from the customary, and transgressing the boundaries of the everyday. The notion becomes ‘time out of time’. Bakhtin’s Carnival experienced its own concept of time, space, laws and the freedom of a world unto itself. But this festive world, with its own construct of temporal time, maintains a connected relationship to the official marking of time. The relationship is clearly expressed in the connection between the Church’s commemoration of Lent and the celebration of Carnival in the days preceding. Linear time brings with it a sense of history and closure that supports the concept of classic imagery, with its completed, whole, civilised man standing in contrast to the grotesque imagery which supports, by its ambiguous imagery, a sense of past and becoming. The ambiguity created provides a vital link, reflecting the human’s relationship to the order of the primary binary while also leaving cyclical time as a disordered and subordinated remnant, subject to the process that ends with its attempted annihilation.

It is in such ambiguity that the duality of life is expressed; grotesque realism recognises the transgression between body and world that is life, an understanding increasingly repressed by the ‘civilising process’—a force that has distanced people from the experience of a festive life and the folk culture of Carnival. The lived world has been replaced by the world of spectacle, with carnival now only approached through the order of ‘high’ culture, the images of Carnival eating, drinking, defecating and sex turned into vulgarities. This constraint by seriousness, Bakhtin suggests, diminishes life. A life no longer understood in the same manner cannot afford the same sense of rejuvenation or change born of disorder. Fear replaces
carnival laughter and without a sense of fearlessness, Bakhtin (1984, p. 47) argues, complete liberty is lost. This stance resonates with that of Finkelstein (1989), who also warns of the diminished life led without the positive and rejuvenating embracing of disorder. This disorder is capable of acting as a social foil to the rationalised and stagnant order, for within Bakhtin’s Carnival there is on offer a check or balance on the forces of monopoly that Elias identified. Here there is a relationship with Bourdieu (1984, p. 179), who argued that food offers one explicit means of challenge to the hegemonic order. This is seen to effect a disruption to the monopoly of taste offered by bourgeois cuisine.

The role of food – Bakhtin’s theory of banquet images in Rabelais

The writing of Rabelais abounds with images of food, drink and eating, and for Bakhtin these banquet images are a critical element. The entire fourth chapter of *Rabelais and His World* is devoted to their analysis, in the celebration of Carnival and more generally in the festive life of humans. Food also provides Bakhtin, in the structuralist tradition, a convenient surface representation of folk culture that can be employed to uncover deeper levels of meaning within Rabelais’ work, or to develop his theoretical perspective of Carnival. Feasts, besides Carnival proper, were a major manifestation of folk culture. Bakhtin classified these carnivalesque feasts within the category of festivity he labelled ‘ritual spectacles.’ They were often celebrated with other forms of spectacle, such as market fairs and other varied forms of open-air amusements that enjoyed the carnivalesque spirit. But the feast was not simply linked to Carnival because of biological necessity, nor as a source of physical pleasure, and while the sharing of food as a demonstration of social inclusion is important for Bakhtin, it is the symbolism communicated by the feast as the central element in the ritual life of humans that emerges as important:

The feast (every feast) is an important primary form of human culture. It cannot be explained merely by the practical conditions of the community’s work, and it would be even more superficial to attribute it to the psychological demand for periodic rest. The feast had always an essential, meaningful philosophical content. No rest or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se; something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of
practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without the sanction there can be no festivity (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 8-9).

Festive eating must be fused with the social life of the community (Douglas, 1975, p. 257); it must offer a ritual tool that symbolically facilitates the transgression of boundaries of the everyday and allows movement between the planes of sacred and the profane. This festive food must take meaning from the food of the everyday and differentiate itself. The notion of abundance or excess is particularly powerful in any society that suffers a risk from the effects of famine. It becomes a means of celebrating life--not just of the individual but of the collective working together, a means of recognising the triumph of man over nature. Feasting in this form becomes Bakhtin’s (1984, p. 278) “banquet for all the world.”

Feasting and its associated leisure can therefore be read emblematically as a sign for the binary opposite of work, where in the production of food the lower classes traditionally experience disadvantage. Food, particularly in excess, is viewed as the sign marking the successful end result of the collective effort of work. This link between food, work and celebration inextricably ties feasts into the social calendar of the human by marking the passage of time, as a symbolic indicator of beginnings, ends and potential.

For Bakhtin (1984, p. 9):

The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal, always led to festive perceptions of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the particular character of the feasts.

Here in the complex relationship between feasts and time we see an expression of the duality of worlds which Bakhtin is seeking to explain. The use of a feast to mark beginnings and ends can be tied to time measured in either a linear or cyclical sense.
In turn, this provides a means of engendering and differentiating feasts, with the character of the order expressed by the competing time ideologies. Bakhtin argues that this concept is seen in the relationship that exists between official and carnival feasts.

While both types of feasts (official and carnival) belong to the category of festive eating, and more broadly to Douglas’s category of all meals, official feasts and carnival feasts differ in one major aspect. Carnival feasts provided the realm of Bakhtin’s second life of folk culture, and despite being excluded from the official domain these feasts found a home in the popular sphere of the marketplace. These feasts were inclusive: feasts that embraced all peoples, the “banquet for all the world” in a celebration of the cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth. This inclusion extends Elias’s concept of chains of dependence, with Bakhtin conceptually linking all people together in the ultimate chain of dependence, the recognition of a common humanity. These feasts allowed a stepping-away, a time out of time accompanied by the temporary suspension of social hierarchies, offering for a period, hope, a utopian vision of community, freedom, equality and abundance. Importantly, these feasts held out for all people the possibility of change. They offered a regenerative festive form that was inextricably linked to the cyclical nature of life.

During the Middle Ages, standing in stark contrast to this ideal was the official feast sponsored by Church, feudal society or state. Rather than offering folk the utopian ideals embodied in the carnival feast, these official feasts served to sanction and reinforce the existing hegemonic order and the status quo. The current world order is affirmed and reinforced in a commemoration that:

asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the distinct hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms and prohibitions. It was a triumph of the truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9).

Bakhtin suggests that the notion of festive laughter must remain alien to the serious nature of the official feast, which exists not to offer optimism to the people, hope
brought by change, but to confirm the current hegemony. Official feasts provide a formal link with the concept expressed by linear time; change and upheaval became relegated to history, the status quo reconfirmed and the values of the dominant order restated. “(T)he official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present,” Bakhtin argues (1984, p. 9).

These two types of feast represent an expression of competing ideologies. Carnival feasts can be seen as an articulation of folk life, a repository of a ‘true’ but betrayed human festivity. This honest festive character, Bakhtin argues, while diminished, is indestructible and will always remain a threat to the hegemony. This suggestion supports Bourdieu’s observation of working-class cuisine; that is, that food remains a strong repository of the spirit of defiant opposition to this day.

For Bakhtin (1984, p. 281), Rabelaisian banquets with their eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The physical act of eating very clearly displays this characteristic, as “the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense.” Symbolically, the open mouth is a site of ambiguity, a boundary between the individual and the world, a place where the collective body of man tastes the world, consuming and conquering, transgressing boundaries by making the world part of the body. There is a fusion between the devouring and devoured, that mirrors the fusion between dominant and dominated that occurred only in Carnival. Symbolically, food serves as a reminder of this disorder, reinforcing the carnival transgression of boundaries and the joyful triumph, a celebration of life and death.

It is this cyclical and unfinished nature of eating that also links feasting to the lower body stratum. For Bakhtin, some episodes—such as the birth of Gargantua (Book 1 Chapter 4)—so closely interweave these two sets of images, particularly the mouth, the belly, the genitals and the buttocks, that it is difficult to define the boundary between the body and food. Images of food become fused to images of the body and procreation, opening up the body and highlighting all forms of bodily interaction with the world. Eating, defecating and copulating are all praised, counter to the impression given by Elias, who argues that the trajectory set by the ‘civilising process’ would seek to help distance these activities. Bakhtin (1984, p. 335) goes as
far as arguing that these bodily processes are raised in status and invested with great symbolic power, inverting the prevailing social hierarchy that viewed them as ‘filth’ or, as Douglas observed, ‘matter out of place’. This elevating of the ‘low’ taps the potential of disorder and is central to the concept of the lower body stratum. Food is used to communicate a tangible link with nature, a reminder of human’s enduring relationship to this pole of the binary between nature and culture. Despite engagement with ‘high’ culture, humans have an inescapable biological need to eat. Food and eating are transformed, celebrated with other bodily functions as public events not relegated to the private world. The transgressive character of the grotesque and unfinished body, the lower stratum, stands in contrast to the order of the idealised, classic, individualised and private body, conceived as cut off from the earth and as focused on the heavenly. For Bakhtin, the inherent ambiguity of food and eating is useful to the communication of the duality of Carnival. Food therefore becomes an important key for Bakhtin in his insight into the complexity of Rabelais’ work.

Rabelais uses feasts as a literary device, either as a stage or symbolically to mark and celebrate the completion of some aspect of narrative. For Bakhtin (1984, pp. 282-3), these feasts, used to provide a sense of order to the narrative, also reinforce the central role of food in Rabelais, demonstrating the interaction between people and the world and their triumph of life. For Bakhtin, these meals are infused with a victorious happiness: “No meal can be sad. Sadness and food are incompatible (while death and food are perfectly compatible)” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 283). This symbolic link of food to death is a reoccurring theme in Bakhtin, used to express the ambiguity inherent in the cyclical relationship between eating, life, death and rebirth. This philosophical approach--of reading meals as signs while building theory--exposes Bakhtin to criticism by scholars such as Berrong (1986, pp. 34-37), who by attempting a reductionist analysis seek to demonstrate that Bakhtin’s interpretation is erroneous. By examining the banquets portrayed in each of Rabelais’ books in detail, Berrong seeks to establish that Bakhtin is idealistic in his interpretation of feasts. The meals in Rabelais are varied in nature, not all displaying the spirit of Carnival, as suggested in the homogeneous, romanticised, Bakhtinian version. This criticism is similar to that levelled at Lévi-Strauss for selective use of examples, and while on the surface Berrong is correct about the meals, he ignores the subtext: that Bakhtin is not
just explaining the actual episodes in Rabelais but also focused on conceptualising a
general banquet theory encased in symbolic culinary language.

The use of the banquet as a literary stage, an ordering mechanism, is acknowledged
by Bakhtin (1984, p. 283). Building dialectic between order and disorder, by
contrasting the order derived from the antique symposium with the festive speech of
medieval grotesque realism, Bakhtin is able to explore the connection between food
and the spoken word. This use of the symposium also acknowledges a common
heritage and the time relationship between the past and present. Speech is
fundamental, but opposed to food, with people symbolically transgressing the body
and engaging externally with the world. Food is consumed, taken inward and speech
is emitted outwards, expressing a binary of eating/talking which expresses the
ambivalent relationship between humans and the world. With speech, the table
becomes a sanctioned stage, a time and place out of time, for table talk is an
expression of festive laughter and jocular speech is a means to engage in a wise,
truthful discourse that is both unconstrained and unafraid. This sanctioned freedom
of festive speech even finds a formal repository in the guise of the clown or fool,
licensed by convention to behaviour and speech within the carnivalesque.

The themes of the table talk may embrace the sublime but are ambivalent. True to the
spirit of Carnival, they are liberated from an official seriousness and connected
downwards to the earth. “The grotesque symposium does not have to respect
hierarchical distinctions; it freely blends the profane and the sacred, the lower and
the higher, the spiritual and material” (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 285-6). For Bakhtin, the
inherent freedom of banquet speech should not be underestimated. It is a utopian
expression of a human’s place in the cosmos, reaffirmed and ambiguously connected
to nature and culture.

Bakhtin acknowledges that festive banquets also provide a stage for Rabelais,
allowing encounters between individuals or individual characteristics developed and
interwoven into the plot. The character can be called into question, for example, by
projecting grotesque imagery onto the individual body. The grotesque image of the
fat belly can be used to represent opposing themes. This ambiguity can be further
built by use of a class association, such as the popular representation of the fat abbot.
Two opposing messages are created: the fat belly is symbolically representative of the carnivalesque, a collective abundance, and the popular glutton of a consuming and conquering nature, utopian in outlook and fertile, pregnant with the future. This is contrasted symbolically to the fat private body that is seen to be taking bread from the mouths of the people. The abundance of the belly is a sign of a philosophical difference, the contrast between the collective desire for ‘much’ and the individual desire for ‘more’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 292). This grotesque imagery of the fat abbot conveys a complex message, a contrast between a life of the material body and that of the ascetic ideal, forcing a thoughtful reflection on the two philosophical approaches to life.

For Bakhtin, the banquet imagery in Rabelais displays the spirit of the carnival. These are images that liberate and communicate in a fearless tone that builds upon the verbal speech of table talk to question the existing order. The food is symbolic of man’s struggle and represents a conquering of the world, a triumph over nature, and the abundance of food a celebration of the extent of the victory. Images of food and drink are used symbolically, linked to binary values such as mind/body, work/leisure or private/public to question the world and the human approach to life. Carnival and Lent, with their emblematic foods, are used to contrast material versus ascetic, the body/mind approaches to life. This particular use of food imagery in Rabelais is so strong that Bakhtin (1984, p. 280) is moved to comment on its absence in the utopian episode of the Abbey of Thélème. Despite the detailed description of the Abbey, there is no kitchen. Utopian imagery, as an inversion of the harsh reality of existence as usually witnessed in traditional portrayals of utopias, makes use of images of abundant food and idleness.

**Conclusion**

The festive tradition of humans has embraced the experience of ritual disorder as a means of transgressing boundaries, stepping away from the everyday and temporarily immersing participants in an existence that recognises but stands in defiant opposition to hegemonic structures of the dominant culture. Bakhtin’s identification of this alternative folk world, which reveres disorder, provides a necessary foil to the rationalisation and order that Elias identified as the dominant force in his ‘civilising
process’. When combined, these two writers point, from different directions, to the tensions of life that are experienced by humans trapped between the values expressed by the primary binary of nature/culture. Bakhtin identifies and elaborates the position of the festive person in touch with the values expressed by nature. This bottom-up force seeks change in the social structure of hegemony, an egalitarian freedom, an existence that embraces the material pleasures of life. Elias describes the alternative: a view from the position of culture as an economic person, civilised yet subdued, rational, self-controlled, and a servant in the social hierarchies of the hegemony.

Bakhtin’s thesis is important because he draws from Rabelais the necessity of recognising a mechanism in folk culture for holding in check the power of monopolies isolated by Elias. Offering a perspective from the position of the dominated, the laughing chorus of the marketplace, Bakhtin (1984, p. 274) articulates a world view, a perception of history, which he suggests would otherwise be incomplete and distorted if only understood from the perspective of the dominant order. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque offers the dominated of society a means of hope. It is in the disorder of Carnival--a force pregnant and empowered with the possibility of change and challenge, to the stagnant safety offered by the existing hegemonic order--that an alternative can be found.

Bakhtin extracts from Rabelais’ use of food a suitably symbolic means to express his own thesis. The culinary language is capable of conveying the nuanced message in a manner that practically expresses a duality, a twin worldview. The transgressive nature and symbolism of food enables Bakhtin to provide insight into the world of the carnivalesque, a world that expresses movement towards change for the better.

McDonald’s as a food symbol that is representative of the end of the twentieth century could now be situated into an intersection of these two longer and competing versions of the food history of our Western ‘hot’ society. The dominant history is a ‘top-down’ narrative centred on Elias. This history, characterised by the increasing rationalisation of order, witnesses the slow triumph of the bourgeoisie driven by the ‘civilising process’. The other ‘bottom-up’ narrative is a counter-narrative associated with Bakhtin that sees disorder as an ever-present and positive force. The thesis has provided a map for each history, in which the continual and constitutive
order/disorder dialectic can be seen to play a different role that thus creates a duality of order from the two perspectives. The constitutive ambiguity that this order/disorder dialectic and the duality order generate can now be explored through food, by examining two key intersecting moments in the histories. The first returns to the source of Bakhtin’s ‘examples’, the books of Rabelais positioned at the interface between mediaeval ‘disorder’ and the coming bourgeois order of modernity.
Chapter 4--the meanings of Carnival

Introduction

Bakhtin’s legacy is the theorising of carnival, not simply as a ritual, but as mode of understanding that can be applied to decoding the culture of the twentieth century. Using Rabelais as a source of inspiration, Bakhtin conceived a folk culture that stands in defiant opposition to the official ruling class order. As Bakhtin suggests, it is only by reading and understanding the competing narrative offered by the ‘laughing people’ of any epoch that cultural life as a whole can be understood.

While this understanding is valuable, Rabelais still has something more to offer for decoding a twentieth century food symbol such as McDonald’s, rather than simply providing the source of Bakhtin’s insight. Rabelais’ literature provides an instructive example of the complex use of a culinary language to help create dialectic between order and disorder and the duality of order. Using a construct of order within the texts that serves to highlight the structuralist’s binary approach, Rabelais provides a purposeful juxtaposition of order and disorder, ‘high’ and ‘low’, serious and comic, to create ambiguity, two competing intertwined narratives, illustrating perspectives of both Elias and Bakhtin.

Within these competing narratives Rabelais makes full use of the communicative properties of food as an important literary device. Food is employed not only in a structuring role (ordering) but also as a means of engaging the reader with the properties of disorder (a literary device to interrogate order). Rabelais uses food as a secondary language to develop within his texts not only themes of popular entertainment, but simultaneously a mode of critique of his contemporary society.

Rabelais, as Bakhtin notes, writes at a dramatic time in history. Rabelais’ texts, with their social critiques, are situated at an important intersection in history, the interface between medieval ‘disorder’ and the coming bourgeois ‘order’ of modernity. In Rabelais we see a reference point for the twin alternate histories of Elias and Bakhtin. The inherent ambiguity of Rabelais’ writing has helped maintain interest.
and fuelled Rabelaisian scholarship, which as a genre provides an insight into the workings of social order and the rise of the bourgeoisie. The various interpretations of Rabelais provide a map of the trajectory of the ‘civilising process,’ a demonstration of how far we have progressed from the uncouthness perceived in Rabelais. It was this increasing mode of ‘high’ culture interpretation that sought to ignore the earthiness of Rabelais, and that serves to contrast Bakhtin’s approach. Bakhtin (1984, p. 473) argued this ‘high’ culture interpretation was limited and the “main failure of contemporary West-European Rabelaisian.”

Rabelais, as Bakhtin’s work helps demonstrate, remains relevant across modernity because he harnesses the constant dialectic between order and disorder and the duality of order. By bringing disorder to centre stage Rabelais offers his reader the chance to experience the disorder that questions the official perspective. Disorder is used to create narratives that provide a vehicle, often a culinary vehicle, for the reader to pursue an examined existence, to think about meaning and order in his or her own social world.

**Reading Rabelais – Rabelais as an open text**

The choice of text greatly influenced the studies of both Elias and Bakhtin, helping to shape the orientation of their respective perspectives. This was not simply because of what was written on the page but was also generated by the deep structural order that shapes texts as a surface representation of culture. Bakhtin (1984, p. 1) openly describes the difficulty in reading and understanding Rabelais, as is evident from the opening words of his book: “Of all the great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated.” For Bakhtin (1984, p. 2), Rabelais’ position as a greater writer is ambiguous. Standing outside ‘great literature’ but claiming a place amongst the highest station of modern European literary figures, Rabelais has “not only determined the fate of French literature and of the French literary tongue, but influenced the fate of world literature as well.” While cautious of Bakhtin’s Rabelaisian scholarship, Screech (1979, p. 1) seems in full agreement with Bakhtin on the difficulty of interpretation. Screech’s own book opens with a similar sentiment to Bakhtin’s: “The works of a comic writer of genius who lived four and a half centuries ago pose special difficulties of interpretation.” This, Screech suggests,
is because comedy is often circumscribed by time and place and, according to Bakhtin, this propensity is amplified at times of social upheaval.

It is not simply the distance of time that separates the reader from Rabelais but also the complexity of unravelling meaning from text that uses a juxtaposition of the serious and the comic, the ‘high’ and ‘low’, and the erudite and obvious. Bakhtin and Screech agree, each from their own perspectives, that this requires the reconstruction of the then contemporary use of humour. Screech (1979, pp. 3-4) moved to comment that this duality of comic and serious writing can be difficult to comprehend. Today, some cultures would find the custom unfamiliar, therefore some people may lack practice with deciphering this form of juxtaposition. This reconstruction of carnivalesque folk humour, while central to Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais, presents Bakhtin with a serious challenge. To read Rabelais, Bakhtin (1984, pp. 132-3) must approach the text through the order imposed by a ‘high’ culture literary framework and the censorship of the ‘civilising process,’ as the mass participatory festival that was Carnival is distanced and replaced by a restrained and ordered form of private entertainment. While this construct may still satisfy the bourgeoisie’s desire to indulge its fascination safely, mixed with disgust for ‘low’ culture, this is behaviour structured by the social hierarchy construct; it offers a muted understanding of Rabelais. To unlock Rabelais, Bakhtin must interpret the lived experience of Carnival from a commoditised interpretation written for the growing literate elite. Stallybrass and White (1986, pp. 60-61) argue that despite Bakhtin’s recognition of this difference and the treatment of actual lived events as thematic repertories for the literary, these inherent differences remain unresolved. This leaves Bakhtin with a view constrained by the limitations imposed by the text, a situation similar to that of Elias, who is constrained by his choice of aspirational etiquette texts.

This dilemma is further complicated by Rabelais’ demonstration of wideranging erudition. Rabelais can be seen as a sophisticated bricoleur, taking appropriated elements to construct his stories, based upon frameworks of order derived from both ‘high’ and folk culture. This intertwining produces writing that Rabelais cautions should be not taken at face value or dismissed as mere foolishness. Rabelais suggests an approach to his reader that embraces a duality of understanding to uncover the truths he is presenting with regards to both the political situation and domestic life. It
is the difficulty of straddling two opposing worldviews simultaneously, and of identifying and decoding a multilayered message contained within two value systems, that challenges the reader. This challenge, Bakhtin (1984, p. 4) goes so far as to suggest, has meant that Rabelais has remained unexplored until Bakhtin’s own work. The inability to straddle the twin mindset can result in a misinterpretation, particularly when the work is interpreted from a myopic top-down, dominant and official perspective. Rabelais’ writing and how it could be interpreted (or misread) was perceived as such a threat to order that it was censored at the time by the Sorbonne. This act of censorship serves to illustrate how any disorder that is perceived as a threat to the order of a ‘hot’ society is dealt with by the hegemonic order’s propensity to the annihilation of disorder.

It is the simultaneous embrace of two opposing worldviews, a top-down and bottom-up approach that is the attraction and strength of Rabelais. For Bakhtin (1984, p. 3), there is a beauty in the Rabelaisian images as they stand in opposition to any sense of a pious, narrow-minded authoritarianism. They are images that “are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.” This perspective situated Bakhtin on the periphery of Rabelaisian scholarship, which had focused on exploring the rich and diverse range of classical influences on the writing. However, it is only when the reader embraces the full impact of the dialectic between order and disorder that Rabelais’ commentary is unlocked to unmask the complexities of his stories. The open nature of the text may stand as a barrier, concealing the sense of order that is perceived to be inherent in this exemplar of classical literature. However, engagement in the manner suggested by Rabelais opens the reader not only to the disorder inherent in the text, but also the disorder generated as the reader begins to question more generally the construct of everyday order.

**Rabelais – why Rabelais is important**

The writing of Rabelais is a classic example of literature that demonstrates the intertwining and jarring juxtaposition of classic and comic elements, producing an instrument that encourages the interrogation of order, the examined life for which Finkelstein called for. Using the pseudonym of Master Alcofribas, Abstractor of
Quintessence, Rabelais composes an author’s prologue to Book 1, the second to be written, *The Very Horrific Life of the Great Gargantua, Father of Panagruel* (1535), it offers the reader advice on how to approach and decode Rabelais’ writing.

Quickly establishing a link with the classics by noting Alcibiades’ praise of Socrates in *The Symposium*, Rabelais marks his own level of scholarship and that expected of the reader. In concert with this classicism is the use of a vulgar base style of comedy, creating the disconcerting juxtaposition of classic and comic. Rabelais asks the readers who he describes as “my good disciples, and a few other unoccupied madmen,” to look below the triviality of the comedy and carefully consider what is expounded, suggesting that there is a more serious content to be engaged. He does this by encouraging the reader to emulate a dog gnawing away at and finally sucking the marrow from a bone to obtain the very essence of the meat. But Rabelais cautions the reader not to be carried away with fanciful allegories, with another classical reference to some outlandish interpretations of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Linking the writing to eating and drinking, Rabelais finally uses the opposing symbolism of wine and oil to instruct his reader that it is healthier and easier to approach his work from the attitude towards life symbolised by wine. Readers are asked to “remember to drink to me in return, and I’ll drink to you,” in a ritual use of food that symbolically demonstrates an empathy and friendship with the author. This is a rare mindset, one of which Bakhtin proudly reminds us that he is in possession. Rabelais has extended an offer of camaraderie; if it is accepted the reader will be granted an invitation to membership of the company of Pantagruelists, a group itself read by its relationship to food. With the Pantagruelists’ worldview symbolically represented by the sign of wine, their adherence to a philosophy of peace, happiness, robust health, good cheer, and pride in being boon companions, it is little wonder that Rabelais seeks to mark inclusion in their company by a gastronomic act. Rabelais indicates that the reader must be ready and able to embrace this spirit if he or she is to understand his writing.

From Rabelais’ prologue one ascertains why the writing has had such a deep and lasting effect on readers. It rests in the appeal to the reader to experience the world in its duality and comprehend the position of the ‘other’, to recognise the importance, necessity and relationship of sets of opposing binary primary forces: culture and
nature, classic and comic, ‘high’ and ‘low’. This duality encompasses both Elias’s ‘civilising process’ and its alternative, expressed more broadly in Bakhtin’s grotesque realism and lower body stratum. Rabelais requests a shared worldview that is devoid of hegemonic oppression, a humanist view of the world that embraces a passion for life. Rabelais is important because he has delivered a means to experience the dialectic between order and disorder. His writing spans modernity, linked by ancient sources to the classical period but still relevant to our contemporary society because he commands readers to examine life not from a simple perspective but from a reflective complex duality.

Food in Rabelais

Commentators are often struck by the sheer number of references to food in the narratives of Rabelais. Yet despite the vital role food images play in constructing the narrative’s duality, discussion of food imagery is rarely central in Rabelaisian scholarship, with the focus geared toward the ‘high’ cultural elements. Rabelais, however, seems cognizant of the power of food to communicate at both a superficial or deeper structural level, as well as to be capable of camouflaging multifaceted and nuanced messages. Rabelais uses culinary language bundled with and on top of other systems of meaning, building a vast conceptual network of compound symbolic relationships. These then become the Rabelaisian story. The ambiguous nature of food, trapped between biological necessity (nature), and representation of society (culture), is used to emphasise the duality and to accentuate symbolically, for the reader, the ambiguous place of humans in the cosmos. Food affords Rabelais a ready tool that allows an entertaining juxtaposition of order and disorder while also providing a medium that transgresses boundaries. Food is used as a cultural sign of transformation, of change, from raw ingredients to civilised meal. This transgressive potential is also clearly observable as food provides Rabelais a ritual means to cross the boundary between individual body and the world. Symbolically eating and speech—‘table talk’—represent the examined life Rabelais desires for his readers, as the individual engaging with the world at both natural and cultural levels. Rabelais uses the richness of the culinary language to tempt his readers with a banquet of carnivalesque word-pictures. As Barthes uses sugar to highlight differences for his readers, Rabelais uses food to question, to examine and to challenge his world.
Rabelais’ world remains connected to today, linked by food, if we accept Douglas’s (1975, p. 257) idea that all meals carry the meaning of all other meals. Food has provided Rabelais with a metaphorical means to connect across time, from antiquity, to the present day, and across all humanity.

**The role of food in the novel: an expression of bourgeoisie order**

To appreciate Rabelais’ use of food in his stories fully, we must account for the context of food as a literary sign. A criticism of Bakhtin (LaCapra, 1983) was that his construct of Carnival and folk culture was drawn not from lived experience, but rather constructed through the ‘high’ culture filter of literature. For LaCapra, writing and books have a particular class connotation, with writing used as an instrument of power by one social class in order to dominate another. This use of writing to enforce social hierarchies can be seen as a central tenet of a ‘hot’ society, recording the thinking of the ruling class. Writing serves not only to dominate but also to provide a historical trace of the ‘civilising process.’ Literature and its contents therefore need to be understood as a value-laden cultural construct that is representative of order. The representation of food within literature is ordered in a coherent and consistent manner according to the structuralist method.

Food provides a connection between the reality of the reader and the reality located within the novel. In fiction, food offers a complete semiotic discourse, a secondary complex culinary language similar to that which Barthes (1979) showed is experienced in the everyday. From a structuralist perspective, this use of culinary language maps the literary order and disorder in a manner that mirrors food as a cultural and surface representation of the concrete world. In his intertwined and competing narratives, Rabelais uses food semiotically adding depth and complexity.

In *The Flavors of Modernity*, Biasin (1993) ventures a description of the strategic use of food within literary fiction. He ties the history of the novel as popular fiction to modern technical and social developments and a readership constructed largely on the basis of class (here, the bourgeoisie). This leads to the novel being structured according to a bourgeois sense of order, reflecting a bourgeois value system.
According to this class’s sense of order, food is used in three separate literary strategies. Biasin labels these realism, narrativity and figures and meaning.

According to Biasin, realism mimics reality; food provides a link with the everyday, it carries meanings that have to do with the human experience. Our culinary practices are reference points that lock into a systemised set of human gastronomic experiences, that can be located within socio-cultural, geographical and historical frameworks.

With narrativity culinary signs can be seen to “constitute an integral part of the technique used for representation, narration, and characterization, and hence are meant to establish (and make us understand) the quality and value of the text, its literariness” (Biasin, 1993, p. 11). Food can be used to introduce a number of elements within the story, such as scarcity-excess, desire-satisfaction, or to establish relative positions of authority or subordination.

Finally, Biasin argues, ‘figures and meaning may be subdivided into two concepts, that “on the surface may appear antithetic but which are actually complementary and necessary for all verbal signs: one is cognitive, the other tropological” (Biasin, 1993, p. 16). Firstly, with cognitive use, food is used as a vehicle to explore the fundamental relationship of self to the world and others. Bakhtin’s book *Rabelais and His World* is cited as belonging to this genre. However as both Bakhtin and Rabelais acknowledge, this mode can be problematic and excluding. Because their work advances a gastro-discourse that embraces an anti-dominant ideology, this means only a ‘super-reader’, who is capable of simultaneously appreciating competing narratives driven by opposing value systems, can grasp their message. This difficulty is then compounded, as we have already seen with the criticism of Bakhtin’s interpretation of lived folk culture derived from Rabelais’ literature. The format of books’ delivery directs them primarily to the bourgeoisie, which is more likely to possess the social capital necessary to engage with the classical scholarship. Typically, as Elias (1994) and Bourdieu (1979) argue, the bourgeoisie is constrained by its identification with the dominant ideology and thus experiences difficulty in considering an alternate perspective. Secondly, with the tropological, the culinary sign is used as metaphor or metonymy. The importance Biasin (1993, p. 27) places
on reading the culinary sign is evident in his paraphrasing of Hans Blumenberg: “I could state that the ‘reading’ of food is a heuristic tool indispensable for the ‘readability of the world’”. Again, there is a problematic use of food as a metonym of the social structure. Firstly, it is impossible, as structuralist theory has demonstrated, to map all the detail of the social structure, leaving an author open to criticism that they have simplified the complexity for the sake of convenience. Conversely, this factor also allows writers such as Rabelais to camouflage subversive commentary when required.

These literary uses of food in literature, as outlined by Biasin (1993, p. 3), only work because, despite their fictional context, they are linked to the order of reality. Food can be seen to maintain its system of relationships coherently, with the richness of the culinary sign driven by the fundamental importance of food as a symbolic representation of what Lévi-Strauss suggests lies at the core of our existence: the relationship of the primary binary, nature to culture. The richness of culinary language is tied to the symbolic importance that is wrapped in the binary relationship between food and speech, the twin oralities of the mouth. They are opposites: both transgressive and capable of signifying ambiguous engagement, through the mouth, with the world, offering differing evidence of an individual’s examined existence. Food provides symbolic evidence of the individual’s engagement with the material world of nature, the symbolically ‘low’. Eating, as Bakhtin (1984) argued, is linked to the grotesque body and the life and death struggle to conquer the world. This symbolic defeat of nature by eating is then subject to the ‘civilising process’, used to mark out social hierarchies. This cultural aspect of food is then contrasted with speech as a representation of the world of culture and the mind, the symbolically ‘high’. It is this inherent ambiguity of food and language that makes culinary language such a rich secondary form of communication, capable of conveying complex messages that remain open to interpretation and dependent on decoding by the reader as bricoleur.

Decoding the complexity of food usage in the writing of Rabelais

Rabelais’ literary use of food is complex and absorbing, helping build a rich enigmatic narrative and generating the difficulty of interpretation that both Bakhtin
and Screech observed. One episode drawn from Rabelais’ fourth book (1552), a book published at a time of religious upheaval and censored by the Sorbonne, serves to illustrate this argument clearly. The “War of the Sausages” (Book 4, Chapters 29-44) is arguably one of the most absorbing and carnivalesque food episodes in Rabelais. Drawing on the full spectrum of literary strategy as identified by Biasin, Rabelais constructs a multilayered carnivalesque food-driven narrative. Although problematical, when deconstructed the narrative offers a commentary on contemporary affairs and provokes questions.

In summary, the episode of the “War of the Sausages” is a rollicking adventure, the odyssey of Pantagruel and his men as they sail forth on a voyage to a series of imaginary islands, in search of the Holy Bottle. Sailing past Sneaking-island (Coverup Island), ruled by miserable Quaresmeprenant (Fastilent or Shrovetide), eater of salt hauberks, salt caskets and headpieces, and salt helmets, they sail onward towards the Wild Island, where they encounter a monstrous physeter. After an epic battle in which Pantagruel slays the beast, they take the whale ashore onto Wild Island. This Wild Island is the ancient abode of the Chitterlings or andouilles. Here, while feasting with his men, Pantagruel and company encounter these sausage-people, who, Xenomanes their worldly guide explains, are locked in an irreconcilable war with Quaresmeprenant, their ancient enemy. Preparing a defence against possible attack, Pantagruel enlists his Captains Gobblechitterling and Chopsausage and while Xenomanes offers his explanations to Pantagruel Friar John notices the chitterlings are now preparing to ambush our heroes. Pantagruel, takes council and prepares to stand his ground and fight the treacherous Chitterlings. Under Friar John’s orders, a giant sow, similar in principle to the Greek’s Trojan horse, is constructed and manned by a company of “noble and valiant cooks” ready to do battle in a “culinary war”. In the midst of battle the cooks spill forth and rout the Chitterlings, handing victory to Pantagruel, who then strikes a treaty with the defeated Niphleseth, Queen of the Chitterlings. Sailing onwards, Pantagruel lands on the Island of Ruach which is inhabited by a people who eat nothing but wind and where he ends the reign of terror of Bringuenarilles, a giant who swallows windmills.

In this episode Rabelais is a literary bricoleur par excellence, using not only the full breadth of food and culinary language to establish his carnivalesque episode, but also
drawing on a multifarious range of ordering strategies to create the duality of his competing narratives, conveying both a sense of recognisable order and the desired disorder. Order is constructed from a scholarly use of known, classically derived, structuring elements, such as the hero’s tale, the symbolic language related to Carnival and Lent, Hippocratic medicine, stories and characters from the Bible or mythology, and reference to contemporary affairs (particularly the religious tensions).

The classical references are supplemented with relationship interplay between symbolically opposite values, binaries such as male/female, cooks/sausages, Carnival/Lent, dominant/dominated and, importantly, nature/low/devil versus culture/high/god(s). This establishes both the sense of narrative order, and by employing a disruption of this equilibrium, with techniques such as inversion, the desired sense of disorder is also created. The carnivalesque elements provide sufficient disruptions to engender the critical reader’s analysis. This disorder also throws light on the fragility experienced by some sections of the existing hegemonic order, showing the level of perceived threat created by this form of disorder. This is evident in the book’s censorship.

The analysis of this episode by various critics (France, 1929, Plattard, 1931, Willcocks, 1950, Screech, 1979, Bakhtin, 1984, Kinser, 1990 and Weinberg, 1995) not only highlights the problem of finding ‘super readers’ capable of interpreting the duality of the competing narratives, but also illuminates the role of food in communicating order and disorder. In deconstructing this episode, critics have taken one of three approaches to analysis, all of which serve to demonstrate the dominance of the ‘top-down’ perspective. The analysis serves as an instructional example in the decoding of a rich culinary sign.

Authors such as France (1929), Plattard (1931, p. 256) and Willcocks (1950, p. 179) adopt a comparatively superficial approach. This focus demonstrates Bourdieu’s thesis (1984) of the bourgeoisie’s attempt to appear disinterested in what is ‘low’ and ‘vulgar’. While these critiques do acknowledge the allegorical reference to contemporary events, and the associated order, they do not explore the references or symbolism in any meaningful manner. Explorations of the food references are
limited to reading the Chitterlings as both metaphor for contemporary religious events and an expression of carnival symbolism. France (1929, p. 234) and Plattard (1931, p. 256) both caution their readers to be careful of attributing any significant symbolic meaning to this episode. This caution can be interpreted as a display of subservience to the legitimacy of order.

In contrast, authors such as Screech (1979), Kinser (1990) and Weinberg (1995) develop a set of more thoughtful and well-researched analyses. These focus on points of reference, the development of themes, symbolism and allegory. They all seek a meaning hidden below the superficial humour, as a demonstration of their (literary critic’s) social capital. Weinberg (1995, pp. 367-8) adopts such a method in her analysis, “Layers of Emblematic Prose: Rabelais’ Andouilles.” Using an analogy of geological layers, she sets out to dig through five layers to uncover how “each of Rabelais' word-pictures signifies something and teaches something beyond the obvious and the literal.”

Within these critiques food images are subject to a more rigorous interpretation, again focused on the Chitterlings as a metaphor for contemporary religious events, and also interpreted against the existing rich culinary Carnival and Lenten symbolism. Here, food is shown to be the creator of a recognisable system of order and disorder, drawing on the traditionally opposing value systems of Carnival and Lent. Kinser (1990, p. 84) and Weinberg (1995, p. 371) also point out that Rabelais creates a sense of ambiguity, altering the values Quaresmeprenant traditionally conveys through a minor disruption to these value systems.

Decoding this ambiguity sheds light on scholarship as a means of order creation. Weinberg, author of *The Wine and the Will: Rabelais’ Bacchic Christianity* becomes bricoleur, as she seeks to explain the religious significance of the episode. “Bowen and Kinser have shown that although the battle between Quaresmeprenant and the Andouilles recalls the traditional battle between Carnival and Lent, a literary trope since the thirteenth century at least, neither side in Rabelais' conflict unequivocally represents Lent or Carnival” (Weinberg, 1995, p. 371). Neither party actually represents the time of feasting, so why do they fight? Weinberg finds the answer lies in the religious symbolism: the meal shared by Pantagruel and his men in Chapter
XXXV is interpreted as a symbol of the mass, not as formal service but as agapés, an image Rabelais uses to signify a communion of the minds, a meeting “with the divine spark in one's fellows, and thus the Divine Spirit as well,” (Weinberg 1995, p. 372). The Chitterlings, thus spying Pantagruel’s “celebrating mass” attack what they, as radical Protestants, “viewed as hateful representatives of Rome, or at best as heretics committing sacrilege,” (Weinberg, 1995, p. 372). The disorder presented by the episode is annihilated by Weinberg in a ‘matter of fact’ interpretation that incorporates it into her construct of order; this simultaneously reinforces a central tenet of Elias’s ‘civilising process.’ The lesson that Rabelais is trying to teach is “Moderation is to be praised in all cases.” In the tale, just as Pantagruel was in danger from (symbols of) excess, so too, in the Church, moderation is in danger from the excess of radical reformers and archconservatives (Weinberg, 1995, p. 377).

Weinberg’s decoding spotlights the order and disorder dialectic, including the class construct, that operates around Rabelais. Firstly, folk humour was simply neutralised by being dismissed or ignored. The threat of danger created by disorder emanating from ‘high’ culture references requires an alternative strategy: the establishment of a desired form of ‘order’ over the narrative by the exertion of scholarly ‘control’ over the disparate elements in the storyline. These elements are rationalised ‘included’ in the known, removing the threat to hegemony. Scholarship is a significant representative of this hegemony. Subservience to order is reinforced by extolling the virtues of moderation and self-control.

The third method of critique embraces the carnivalesque and elevates the disorder, as witnessed in the Bakhtinian approach. This method is in seeming opposition to the scholarly reductionist approach that seeks to explain every nuance, in order to decode the complexity of Rabelais. Bakhtin, as we have seen, is not focused on minute detail but rather focused on expansive explanation of his folk culture theory. It is surprising that Bakhtin barely mentions, let alone probes, this narrative, one of the main carnivalesque episodes. Bakhtin’s critique (1984, p. 452) is limited, itself seemingly constrained by the control of the hegemonic order: the Quart Livre “is filled with allusions to contemporary political events and problems.” The journey itself “combines the ancient Celtic route to the utopian land of death and regeneration with the very real colonial explorations of Jacques Cartier”. The nation of France's
conflict with the Pope surfaces in the chapters concerning the decretals. "Allusions to political events can also be found in such important episodes of the Fourth Book as the sausage war (the struggle of the Geneva Calvinists) and the picture of the storm (the Council of Trent)", (Bakhtin 1984, p. 452). The episode’s predominant food image, the chitterlings, Bakhtin is content to address briefly, firstly collectively with all other food references in his chapter "Banquet Imagery" and, secondly, in the context of the Carnival/Lent relationship.

This carnivalesque episode demonstrates the complexity of decoding the competing narratives of Rabelais while simultaneously validating the contribution that food imagery and culinary language contribute to the text. The critiques highlight the working of the order/disorder dialectic, each author as a bricoleur, decoding the elements of Rabelais, seeking to remove the ambiguity, and then arranging the elements into their own account that pays homage to the increasingly rationalised bourgeoisie order of a ‘hot’ society. The competing narratives of Rabelais become subservient to the dominant perspective, even to some extent by Bakhtin, yet the latent fascination with the earthiness of Rabelais can still be witnessed, distanced by an increased civility. These critiques serve to demonstrate the working of order within the dialectic of order and disorder and the duality of order thus aiding in our understanding of the manner of decoding food symbols drawn from popular culture.

**The use of food as an ordering device in the writing of Rabelais**

Rabelais makes full use of food as a literary device to create order within his texts. This order must not only provide a link between reader and the world of fiction but also be indicative of the duality of narratives that are at play. Food can thus be seen to be a means that is used to inform the reader of the reality within the text, as well as the perspective position of characters within the competing narratives. Even in the writing of Rabelais, food maintains its role as a symbolic means of communicating the deep structures of society.

The historical position of Rabelais is useful in demonstrating the durability of the culinary language as a system of communication. While dynamic, subject to forces such as the ‘civilising process’, food has remained a useful tool for connecting with
Rabelais. Rabelais’ use of food in a realistic manner connects the reader to the characters, firstly at the level of biological necessity, demonstrating a shared sense of nature with the characters: they are ‘human’ too. Secondly, food connects the reader and the social order of the fictional characters at a cultural level.

The characters can be classified in relationship to social hierarchies; judgments similar to Bourdieu’s (1984) critiques of taste can be made. The characters defined by their food habits become the embodiment of Brillat-Savarin’s (1970, p. 13) fourth aphorism “Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are.” The sophistication of this usage in conveying meaning was viewed previously in Bakhtin’s (1984, pp. 292-4) commentary on the fat abbot as a sign. As demonstrated, food as a code provides a rich map that communicates a culture’s social order. This includes the fictional carnivalesque social order of Rabelais’ characters, for without this map of social order it would be impossible for the reader to differentiate, to know what defines order or disorder, or where the boundaries have been transgressed. Without a map, Rabelais could not take his readers into another realm, where they can step away from their social order and hold up a carnivalesque mirror to reflect and view society. It is critical that Rabelais build an understanding of the fictional culture of the everyday if the reader is to proceed to the deeper levels of interpretation. The use of food in this ‘disordered’ genre of fiction is employed because it is capable of providing an interpretable surface representation of the deep structures created by Rabelais.

Rabelais mentions his characters eating together, sharing meals, as a strategic device. Often Rabelais uses the meal as a literary method to signal closure to an episode within the story, as an epilogue. By having the characters eat together, he signals that the conflict between the parties has been resolved and a sense of closure is now required. The ‘feast’ at the end of the litigation between Lords Kissarse and Bumfondle is an example of this use (Book 2, Chapter 13).

The meal as ending also provides a link to the dual concepts of time. From a linear ‘hot’ society’s perspective the meal as closure marks the passing of time: here the meal links the past with the present and the potential of the future. Similarly, in a cyclical reading the meal ends the episode just as death marks the end of life; it also
opens up potential beginnings, just as death heralds a new birth (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 283). Here, in a cyclical context, the meal may end an episode but the story continues.

This use of food and eating together is also used by Rabelais in the context Douglas (1975, p. 256) discussed in relation to hospitality. Food plays a ritual role that facilitates transgression, as the disordered stranger moves across boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and is reclassified temporarily as ordered, a guest. Acts of hospitality, such as Pantagruel hosting a dinner (Book 3, Chapters 29-36), signify a particular construct of order that governs the interaction and relationships between host and guest. This form of eating together indicates the creation of order through the civilising process outlined by Elias.

This realistic use of food and the civilising process as an ordering principle can be seen in relationship to Pantagruel. The participation in a meal marks the end of Pantagruel’s childhood (Book 2, Chapter 4); by complying with socially accepted food habits the young Pantagruel is expressing his acquiescence to the civilising process demonstrating that he now understands and has socialised the necessary order imposed by the dominant social value system. The movement from cradle, (‘low’), to table, (‘high’) is symbolically the transition between disorder and order. Later, during his adulthood, Pantagruel demonstrates the successful result of this process of socialisation by suggesting and then hosting a dinner that allows Panurge to consult with a theologian, a doctor, a jurist, and a philosopher on the subject of marriage and cuckoldry. The meal is a stage for the characters, building social networks, their social class identified by their professions; Pantagruel in turn demonstrates his social position of authority and status as host. The table talk remains in character, instructive and largely refined. This act of hospitality allows Rabelais to use a meal as a display of hegemonic order.

This meal also serves to demonstrate the inherent problem of interpretation within the duality of order, however. Bakhtin (1984, p. 280) decodes the meal from his ‘bottom-up’ perspective as a prime example of his banquet imagery, citing the freedom of conversation. Berrong (1986, pp. 82-3), on the other hand, concedes that there has been a lapse of decorum, with respect to the derogatory commentary
offered on women’s inferiority. He suggests that this meal, in spite of the nature of the comment, is not reminiscent of Bakhtin’s concept of a popular culture feast, preferring instead to cite this meal as an example of Rabelais’ actual distance from Bakhtin’s interpretation.

This ambiguous interpretation of the above meal is contrasted with the order expressed in the banquet episodes associated with the Dipsodes (Book 2, Chapter 28-32), where the meal offers a clearer expression of ‘bottom-up’ order. Here the hedonistic characteristics Bakhtin identified as critical to his ‘banquet for all the world’ are brought to the fore. After defeating the Dipsodian cavalrymen, Pantagruel and his men set up a celebratory banquet. The men share as equals with the lone surviving Dipsodian cavalrymen, their food consumption described in terms of superabundance, and Panurge behaviour represented in a manner that is consistent with Bakhtin’s ‘lower-body stratum.’ In the middle of some obscene remark, as table talk is invested with the spirit of free jocular speech, Panurge is seen to give “A fart, a leap, and a whistle.” The second major banquet in this episode takes place after Epistémon has been brought back from the dead by Panurge. It is during the celebration that Panurge humiliates King Anarche, transforming him into a hawker of green sauce and then proceeding to launch a tirade against King Anarche. Both of these banquets serve to illustrate Bakhtin’s bottom-up concept of order, which he locates in Rabelais’ culinary imagery. Food is used to demonstrate the egalitarian nature of carnival spirit, rather than communicating socially stratified order.

Rabelais’ competing narratives express the duality of order through the use of food. Here a similar construct of order is witness to that ventured by Bourdieu (1984, p. 179). This class inclusiveness across time adds complexity to Douglas’s (1975, p. 260) assertion of meals retaining meaning; that is “each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals.”

The class issue associated with food is also presented from the alternative top-down perspective. Rabelais uses the civilising influence that knowledge of gastronomy is thought to bring, as a means to correct Gargantua’s loose mode of living (Book 1, Chapter 23). Here Ponocrates institutes a structure of learning that is designed to bring order into Gargantua’s life. Gastronomy is part of this regime; knowledge of
table is seen as an integral component of the learning that a young man must possess to pass into a proper adulthood, with the schedule of study shaped by a set of values that stretches back to antiquity. Aimed at the development of a healthy mind and body, topics for the mind are drawn from the works of classic authors, with philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, music and geometry featured. Exercise for the body comprises equestrian activities, knightly military training, gymnastics, athletics, wrestling and aquatic pursuits. The regime of learning was designed to display a value-laden relationship to the concept of linear time; there was no time for being idle, only for engagement in honourable learning. The course of study is aimed at socialising Gargantua, controlling his natural impulses, instilling in him the self-discipline that so characterized Elias’s ‘civilising process’ and providing Gargantua with a solid foundation of social capital. Here Rabelais draws upon the most fundamental of all ordering principles, with this symbolic movement along the primary binary from the wild nature of the child to the desired culture of manhood. To complete the episode of education, both student and tutor pray to God as an act of worship. In this episode Rabelais stresses the hegemonic order while simultaneously reminding the reader of the self-proclaimed position of humans in the cosmos, above nature, but remaining below God.

Rabelais not only uses food to express the duality of order, but also draws upon traditional symbolic culinary language to insert a known example of the order/disorder dialectic. In ‘War of the Sausages,’ Rabelais makes reference to Carnival and Lenten foods, drawing upon their semiotic characteristics consistent with each festival. Lent is Christian and pious in focus, a time to draw closer to God and to reflect on man’s imperfections. Dry foods, vegetables, fish and oil operate as representative food signs. Carnival, alternatively, is closer to the pagan; it is more beastly. Meat, pancakes, fatty foods and wine are this festival’s culinary symbols.

This use of Carnival and Lenten foods to express the competing narratives, and as a key to Rabelais’ desired interpretation, is a reoccurring theme. In the prologue to Book 1, Rabelais uses the juxtaposition of oil as a Lenten symbol, pious and serious, as a contrast to his position which links wine and the spirit of Carnival. Wine symbolically represents free speech, in vino veritas, a joyful existence, and when shared by Rabelais’ characters, demonstrates that shared values and economic
exchange are generous in nature, linked to both the actual and the symbolic transaction inherent to hospitality. Rabelais (prologue Book 1) asks the reader to “remember to drink to me--in return, and I’ll drink to you all--on the spot.” This mode of wine consumption demonstrates Bourdieu’s (1984, p. 183) observation of class-based behaviour in working-class cafés. In both cases wine consumption is also linked to a carnivalesque and mocking humour. Here food (and wine) consumption is used to mark a perspective on life through the personality of the consumer: knowing how to drink marks one as jovial, while abstemiousness marks one as miserable.

While creating order at one level, the use of wine symbolically also contributes to the complexity and ambivalence of Rabelais’ writing. The ambivalent nature of wine is used to significant effect, highlighting the order/disorder dialectic. Wine loosens tongues and inhibitions, thus providing a threat to the social order. Drinking, especially when coupled with excess, places the drinker dangerously close to the border of disorder, making both the act and actor an object of fear. This contact with the periphery allows for the possibility of symbolic escape from the ravages of this world and offers a promise of hope of a better realm. Here Rabelais has shifted food from a symbol of order to a symbol of disorder.

The use of food to create disorder in the writing of Rabelais

While Rabelais has used a number of classic literary strategies, including food as an ordering principle, to structure his narratives, the overwhelming sensation for the reader is a sense of disorientation, as disorder is moved from periphery to centre stage. Food is used not only to create order but also as a means of disturbing the equilibrium. As a literary tool, food is particularly useful in creating disorder because of its universality and familiarity, and the richness and stability of the culinary language allows even minor transgressions of order to be charged with high levels of symbolism.

The most obvious means of creating disorder is tropological, investing food with characteristics that it does not normally possess. This is achieved by manipulation of the system of order and classification by purposefully creating (Douglas’s term) matter out of place. The resulting ambiguity creates the desired disorder and its
effects. The ‘War of the Sausages’ analysed previously provides an excellent example of this technique, with Chitterlings invested with human characteristic. The Chitterlings having been anthropomorphised and are thus endowed with additional layers of complexity; Weinberg’s (1995, pp. 367-8) analysis provides a useful guide and labels for these additional levels of meaning. The result is fictional characters that are purposefully ambiguous and that challenge the existing order, thus requiring the reader to reflect upon and then restructure the existing order to accommodate them.

The ambiguity expressed by the anthropomorphised Chitterlings was a deliberate creation by Rabelais, however ambiguity can also be generated, as Bakhtin (1984, pp. 325-6) identified, by reference to naturally occurring liminal zones. The mouth, as a site of twin oralities was celebrated as such a site, a portal between the individual and the world. Symbolically through eating, with food transgressing the limits of the body, the individual was able to demonstrate engagement with the material world. Food becomes a sign of humans’ dominance over nature, a function of the success of the current hegemonic order with its mode of work and food production. Eating, particularly that of Bakhtin’s folk banquets, takes place symbolically at the boundary not only of the body and the world, but also, symbolically, between binary poles of the order of work and the disorder of leisure.

Conversely, speech reflects eating, evidence of a cerebral rather than a material engagement with the world. Here the mouth becomes a symbolic reminder of the primary binary. Rabelais then fuels the already ambiguous nature of speech by use of a vernacular derived from folk culture (low), and the conversion of this into literature (high) generates a high/low juxtaposition that is disconcerting. This disorder reflects the social hierarchy that ranks the status of verbal culture lower than written culture. The dialectic is reinforced by reference to the lower-body stratum, through the at-times base but un-erotic language of Rabelais.

Elias (1994) documented this separation of mind and body. Manners reinforce it, prescribing a hierarchical relationship which dictates that eating and talking should not happen simultaneously. Activities of the mind given preeminence over pleasures of the body. Within this structure intellectual activities are seemingly at odds with
the pleasure of the body. Rabelais’ duality is aimed at reuniting the concept of mind with that of the body by recognition of a symbiotic intellectual and physical life. This unison is symbolised in the ambiguity of the mouth, and demonstrably reconciled at table by table talk. It seeks to link the pleasure of the body with that of the mind in a moment where hegemonic order is temporarily suspended, allowing speech and eating both to be accorded importance.

Rabelais (Book 2, Chapter 32) takes the structuring concept of the ambiguous and disordered mouth and further disrupts the equilibrium, overlaying tropological considerations in an episode that sees the author ‘Master Alcofribas’ journey into the mouth and gullet of the giant Pantagruel for a period of six months. Screech (1979, p. 101) rates this episode, quoting an unnamed scholar, as “a model of the Aristotelian ideal of art as mimesis, creative imitation.” Rabelais uses the giant’s size as an expression of carnivalesque superabundance to effect, creating a stage where the author assumes a role that mimics food and becomes the transgressor moving through the mouth between fictitious worlds. Using inversion, Rabelais creates within the body of Pantagruel an internal world that mirrors the external world, complete with cities, hamlets, and inhabitants, and beset with similar ways and problems. Drawing on utopian imagery to focus on the desirable elements of life, Rabelais contrasts these with the undesirable event of Alcofribas’ being robbed while in Pantagruel’s mouth. Rabelais proceeds with this duality and the call to the examined life by reflecting, “I began to think that is very true what they say, that half the world doesn’t know how the other half lives.” The carnivalesque nature of the episode is continued through reference to double transgression and the lower body stratum: Alcofribas survives within the giant’s body on Pantagruel’s own consumed food and replies to Pantagruel’s questioning that he has indeed defecated in Pantagruel’s throat.

The use of excess and superabundance to create disorder is a reoccurring strategy throughout the books. From the first chapter of Book 2 (the first written), Rabelais employs the technique, using ridiculously large and often precise numbers. For example in Book 1, Chapter 4, in relation to oxen he note: “they had killed three hundred and sixty-seven thousand and fourteen to be salted on Shrovetide.” The tripe from these oxen needed immediate eating, so Grandgousier organised a feast for their
consumption at which the pregnant Gargamelle (after eating her fill in one sitting) “ate sixteen hogsheads, two bushels, and six pecks.” Rabelais continues, with Gargamelle as a mother suppling Gargantua her breast milk in a similar superabundance “she could draw from her breasts fourteen hundred and two casks and nine pipes of milk each time” (Book 1, Chapter 7). These images of excess stand in stark contrast to the reality of the times, when, despite the best efforts of work, famine was a constant threat to everyday life, particularly for the peasants. By using these descriptions of excess food, a form of utopian imagery, the deficiencies in the existing order are highlighted. Here the physical abundance of food, presented as a challenge to the hegemonic order, is then overlaid with other implications, conveyed by the culinary language.

Concepts of excess challenge the dominant moral attitude to food consumption. Moderation is a means of demonstrating personal restraint, a concept central to Elias’s civilising process, a position consistent with Christian doctrine which has viewed gluttony as a sin. Moderation in this religious context can itself be exaggerated, by the practice of fasting as means of public worship. The Lenten diet, or fasting as a denial of the earthly pleasure of eating, becomes a symbolic means of demonstrating an attempted personal closeness to God. Conversely, excess and immediate gratification are read as important signifiers of low/nature values. In this manner Rabelais’ use of this food in excess provides a means of symbolic defiance by the folk culture against the hegemony.

The symbolic and physical use of food as a means of defiance is not surprising, given food was the end result of the labour process, a process in which the dominated lower classes of a society are traditionally disadvantaged. Here excess food, particularly if available without the need for the accompanying work, is used symbolically to hold up a mirror that reflects on the realities of life in a world where famine is a constant threat. The portrayal of ready-to-eat food in superabundance is a persistent utopian folk symbol which Rabelais uses as a known disorder construct, capable of provoking a desired response in the reader.

As a concept, the utopia dates to at least the second century B.C. (Rammel, 1990, p. 11). A creation of fantasy, the utopia expresses a desire for a better existence; those
on the lower margins of society can use the utopia as challenge to the current hegemony, through inversion and comic juxtaposition. Customarily the dream contains classic food descriptions, for both material and symbolic reasons: a landscape with rivers of wine, rains of ales, seas of broth, houses with roofs of bacon, fences of sausages, islands of cheese and fowl already cooked that fly into open mouths or pigs that beg to be eaten. With this plenitude of food, capable of being understood by the peasant, but remaining out of reach, the dream is class consistent. This is then coupled with the absence of authoritarian restraint: sleeping rather than working is rewarded, and the dream of social equality is instituted. These utopian dreams of the disenfranchised do not express a desire to be the dominant but rather express a desire of a freedom from hunger and repression. Rabelais employs not only this folk tradition but also uses the name Utopia for his kingdom of Gargantua (Book 2, Chapter 2). Screech (1979, p. 39) notes, in a comment that highlights the complexity of Rabelais, that this use is likely to be a reference made by Rabelais for the scholarly reader, to Thomas Moore’s 1516 work *Utopia*, and offers a veiled humanist comment on that writer and his work.

Rabelais’ appeal to the reader to experience, through disorder, a different society also finds expression in acts of hospitality. While Rabelais used hospitality as an ordering device, a stage to bring together characters temporarily and to build their social relationship, inherent in the act of hospitality is the latent potential for danger. Firstly, hospitality and hostility, as the etymology attests (Visser, 1991, p. 91), are twin faces of interaction with the ‘other’. The Janus-like quality of a binary relationship with the ‘stranger’ is expressed. Secondly, in acts of hospitality there is a fine line between moral duty and excess and, “while the essence of hospitality lies in sharing (food, lodging, and entertainment), the very process of sharing may involve dominating too” (Selwyn, 2000, p. 26).

Hospitality is always an act that appeals to the order/disorder dialectic, a negotiation where the host temporarily entertains the potentially dangerous ‘stranger’ as a guest, allowing both parties the opportunity to draw from the transgressive and potentially dangerous nature of the undertaking. Food is used ritually to facilitate these negotiations, its provision constrained by limits that are defined not only by what is given but also what is withheld, as each party puts into practice tactics that will allow
capitalisation of the situation. Part of the allure of hospitality as a social act is the pregnant possibility of change intrinsic in capitalising on the encounter, either strengthening the bond or terminating the encounter. These aspects of hospitality can be seen in the parley between Pantagruel and Niphleseth, queen of the Chitterlings (Book 4, Chapter 42).

Rabelais uses the natural polarities of the hospitality encounter to effect. Drawing on the religious construct of hospitality as moral duty, simulating God as host, Rabelais has his principal characters demonstrate a civilised and generous quality that reconfirms their high level of social status and highlights social hierarchies of dominate/dominated, even in the inversion and temporarily elevated status accorded to guests. For example in Book 1, Chapter 45, Gargantua and Grandgousier offer a classic moral type of hospitality to a monk and five pilgrims. In the following chapter Grandgousier offers similar hospitality to his prisoner Blowhard. This elevated form of hospitality Rabelais juxtaposed with the baser, carnal instincts of excess and gourmandising. The denigration of King Anarche (Book 2, Chapter 31) by Panurge defies the spirit of hospitality; the danger to the guest is witnessed in Gargantua (Book 1, Chapter 38) eating six pilgrims or the gourmandising described in The palaver of the potted (Book 1, Chapter 5).

Hospitality expresses duality, poised between morality and transgression, duty and pleasure, order and disorder, nature and culture, reflecting humanity’s place in the cosmos. This ambiguous nature is important to the strength of hospitality as a social institution. It is the existence of disorder that makes hospitality both valuable and dangerous as an experience, the danger generated as the practice of hospitality serves to reinforce the existing hegemony, yet simultaneously to expose the existing order to the presence of disorder inherent in the ‘other’. The ritualised interaction between host and guest breaks down barriers of inclusion and exclusion but allows a focus on difference and experience of the ‘other’ as a reflection on the self and as a catalyst for change.

There is a similarity between the role of hospitality and the role of Carnival, as proposed by Bakhtin (1984) and exploited in Rabelais’ narratives. Like Carnival, hospitality is a temporary stepping-away from the everyday, a lived experience, a
separate time and place, bound by its own set of rules, which has embraced a sense of disorder by inverting existing hierarchies and by offering an experience of a potentially different future. For the life of the performance there is no outside world, everyday rules are suspended, replaced by a set of freedoms and responsibilities that govern temporarily. There is a surrendering of the self to experience in the hope of gaining from the encounter. There is a creation of a common bond, a universal spirit. Here, the episodes of hospitality, like Carnival, offer Rabelais a means of taking folk culture experiences and turning them into literary devices that request the reader to engage with Rabelais, in a shared acceptance of the possibility offered by disorder.

This order/disorder dialectic surfaces and Bakhtin (1984, pp. 300-01) notes it in the episode of Messere Gaster and the Gastrolaters (Book 4, Chapters 57-62). Rabelais’ use of food-related imagery constructs an episode that calls into question and leaves unresolved the complexity of life. The scholarly reader is faced with a quagmire of classical references to decode that hint at the complex and ambiguous character of Messere Gaster, first Master of Arts in the world. Rabelais suggests that contrary to what the classics say, Gaster, god of the belly, truly rules individuals. The biological need to eat applies to all persons, king or peasant, so this craving is the greatest social leveller. Food and hunger, Rabelais suggests, are the driving forces of society, of social order; civilisation is created out of the need to eat and the collective response to this hunger. But Rabelais warns against any form of idolatry where the belly becomes an object of worship, implying that the pleasure of food is not found in this form of laziness but can only be found when it is inextricably linked to the concept of work. Gaster, as presented by Rabelais, is representative of a bottom-up force, a force of nature that holds people’s egotism in check. This compelling influence is an important catalyst for social change. This change is ambiguous, however, shown by Rabelais remarking that just as Gaster has brought about the great inventions of humanity, so too has he invented the art and method of their destruction. Here we see a reminder from Rabelais, reinforced symbolically by the long lists of Lenten and non-Lenten foods that punctuate this episode, of the tension between nature and culture and the ambiguous position of humans, particularly when faced with the decision of how to live a meaningful existence.
Conclusion

Rabelais offers far more insight into decoding complex symbols of popular culture than advanced solely within the confines of Bakhtin’s (1984) carnival theory. Rabelais, writing at a time that is positioned at the intersection of medieval disorder and the coming order of modernity, is seen to be an erudite bricoleur who, by using the binary construct of order in a sophisticated manner, delivers a jarring literary juxtaposing and intertwining of order and disorder, the comic and classic, ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, with their respective top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Rabelais’ argument is aimed at an astute reader; his argument proposes that it is only by engagement with the order/disorder dialectic and by decoding the duality that ‘truth’ and a meaningful existence can be discovered. In the guise of a rollicking narrative, Rabelais offers a humanist critique of his own world, projecting a philosophy that celebrates life and learning, is intolerant of the dogmatic or authoritarian and urges the embrace of the examined life, rather than seeking refuge in either the material or the ascetic. By moving disorder to centre stage and employing elements of the literary and carnivalesque, Rabelais provides a complex understanding of the world that embraces the perspectives articulated by both Elias and Bakhtin, combined into an articulation of a twin worldview. His writing has spanned modernity, linked by ancient sources to the classical period, but still remains relevant to contemporary society, still challenging his reader to reflect on his or her world. Rabelais commands readers to examine life not from a simple perspective but from a perspective of a reflective and complex duality.

Food plays a vital role in communicating Rabelais’ complex message. Using a range of literary strategies, Rabelais has drawn on the stability and rich tradition of culinary language to construct an open text that encompasses the sweep from rollicking entertainment to deep social questioning. The open nature of the text has fuelled a tradition of Rabelaisian scholarship that, as a genre, also offers insight into the interpretation of the symbolic language of food. Using the transgressive and symbolic nature of food, Rabelais created an ambiguity on the page--a page that still clearly articulates its message of the regenerative power of disorder. In his narratives, Rabelais demonstrates an understanding of the constant dialectic between order and
disorder and the duality of order. By trying to understanding Rabelais the reader gains practice at decoding complex ambiguities. Rabelais seemingly understood the symbolic role of food signs as a means of representing the duality of order, the twin worldview.

The thesis has used Rabelais’ writings to mark and explore a key intersecting moment in the two competing histories: the interface between medieval ‘disorder’ and the coming bourgeois ‘order’ of modernity. Rabelais’ writing used the duality of order consciously to construct a social critique, by employing in the narrative a jarring juxtaposition of order/disorder, ‘high’ culture/’low’ culture, and the serious and comic. This intertwining of top-down and bottom-up perspectives produces an important and complex view of the order/disorder dialectic. Rabelais is important to the decoding of food symbols such as McDonald’s, not simply because his writing was the source of Bakhtin’s ‘examples’: the importance of Rabelais is related to his use of food to convey meaning, as a form of secondary or a culinary language. Food is used by Rabelais the bricoleur to construct the intertwined and competing narratives, that by embracing disorder create a sense of ambiguity. This ambiguity serves to encourages the reader to question, to examine his or her existence.

The second key moment and intersection of the two competing histories is located in the early nineteenth century, where Brillat-Savarin apparently marks the triumph of eighteenth-century rationalism.
Chapter 5--high priest of reason

The books of Rabelais provide the thesis with its first key historical food moment, positioned at the interface between medieval ‘disorder’ and the coming bourgeois order of modernity. Rabelais offered an instructive example of the use of food as part of competing narratives that articulate the nature of the order/disorder dialectic. The created sense of ambiguity provides Rabelais with a means of engaging the reader, with the properties of disorder as a literary means of interrogating order. This use of food to critique society provides in turn a grounding in decoding the complexity of food symbols such as McDonald’s. The second key moment and point of intersection of the two competing historical narratives is offered by the French author Brillat-Savarin (1755--1826). Writing towards the end of his life, a life influenced by the dramatic social upheaval of the French Revolution, Brillat-Savarin positions food at the interface of the triumph of bourgeois order over the ‘disorder’ of the deposed aristocracy.

As does Rabelais, Brillat-Savarin purposefully combines traditional elements of high and low to create a jarring juxtaposition that is ambiguous. Brillat-Savarin proposes a new ‘science’ of food: gastronomy. While based upon emerging bourgeois values, Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy seeks to combine the dissimilar elements of mind and body as one through food. This concept of food stands in contrast to the bottom-up folk perspective offered by Bakhtin (1984), but, while supportive of Elias’s perspective of the top-down order of the civilising process, Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy also seeks to challenge this perspective. Because of its ambiguity, Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy offers both support and a challenge to the order of the bourgeoisie. Through the gastronomic ‘science’ of food Brillat-Savarin offers a means of questioning and interpreting his social world, and proposes through food that his reader has not only the means of pursuing an examined existence, but the opportunity of ‘eating a better future’.
Brillat-Savarin – father of French gastronomy

This comprehension of food, as a means of understanding and experiencing a meaningful life, is central to the writing of the French author Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. Born on April 2, 1755 in the town of Belley, he became the magistrate and later, in 1793, was elected mayor despite his previous Royalist association. With the Terror he was forced to flee, however, lucky to escape with his life, escaping first to Cologne, then to Switzerland and finally to the United States. Returning home to a peaceful life in France in 1796, Brillat-Savarin eventually became a judge on the Supreme Court of Appeal, and was invested by Napoleon as a *Chevalier de l'Empire* in recognition of the courage and humanity he had demonstrated as mayor at the height of the Revolution. However, it is not for his professional life that we remember Brillat-Savarin, but for his passion for food and hobby of gastronomic writing.

These writings were self-published, just months before his death in December 1825, as the book *La Physiologie du goût* (later translated into English as *The Philosopher in the Kitchen*). This collection of gastronomic meditations, Brillat-Savarin hoped, would lay the foundation for his new ‘science’ of gastronomy. Like Rabelais, Brillat-Savarin displays a polymorphous attitude to his subject. Requesting that the study of food be taken seriously his book approaches the topic from various perspectives: encyclopaedic, aphoristic, anecdotal, reflective, reminiscing, historical and philosophical. He even offers recipes. In this way, Brillat-Savarin’s work maps the extent of the body of knowledge and stimulates thinking and talking about gastronomy. With a similar voice to that of Rabelais, Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 15-19) expresses concern that his book and ideas will be dismissed as frivolous, that people will prejudge the topic, unwilling to make the effort to engage in the study of food and eating in a serious and meaningful manner.

Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomic writing embodies the mood of the day, the ascent of the bourgeoisie. In her introduction to the book, Anne Drayton (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, p. 12) dismisses one of the chief reproaches of Brillat-Savarin in his day—that the cooking he advocated was middle-class and provincial--by suggesting that this was the book’s great merit. The focus was rightly on the middle-class cuisine rather
than the food of the upper classes, who had substituted show for quality. This positioning provides an instructive insight to the social order that shaped the writing.

Reminiscent of both Rabelais and Bakhtin, Brillat-Savarin writes at a time influenced by dramatic social upheaval. Barthes (1985, p. 75) suggests the book was published into a world so that:

a double postulation of history, or at least ideology, was effected, from which it is not certain we have yet emerged: on one hand a sort of rehabilitation of earthly joys, the sensualism, linked to the progressive sense of history, and on the other hand, a grandiose explosion of *mal de vivre* linked to an entirely new culture of the symbol.

Brillat-Savarin’s writing signals a key moment in Western history, the triumph of the bourgeois order.

**The creation of gastronomic order – the aphorisms**

Serving as a prologue to his book and a structure for his science, Brillat-Savarin sets out his philosophy using twenty aphorisms and writing with the authoritarian voice of ‘Professor’. They are:

Aphorisms

I. The world is nothing without life, and all that lives takes nourishment.

II. Animals feed: man eats: only the man of intellect knows how to eat.

III. The fate of nations depends upon how they eat.

IV. Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are.

V. The Creator, who made man such that he must eat to live, incites him to eat by means of appetite, and rewards him with pleasure.

VI. Gourmandism is an act of judgement, by which we give preference to things which are agreeable to our tastes over those which are not.

VII. The pleasures of the table belong to all times and all ages, to every country and every day; they go hand in hand with all the other pleasures, outlast them, and remain to console us for their loss.

VIII. The table is the only place where the first hour is never dull.

IX. The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of mankind than the discovery of a star.
X. Drunkards and victims of indigestion do not know how to eat or drink.

XI. The right order of eating is from the most substantial dishes to the lightest.

XII. The right order of drinking is from the mildest wines to the headiest and most perfumed.

XIII. To maintain that one wine may not be drunk after another is heresy; a man’s palate can be saturated, and after the third glass the best of wines produces only a dull impression.

XIV. Dessert without cheese is like a pretty woman with only one eye.

XV. A man can become a cook, but he has to be born a rôtisseur.

XVI. The most indispensable quality in a cook is punctuality; it is also that of the guest.

XVII. To wait too long for an unpunctual guest is an act of discourtesy towards those who have arrived in time.

XVIII. The man who invites his friends to his table, and fails to give his personal attention to the meal they are going to eat, is unworthy to have any friends.

XIX. The mistress of the house must always see to it that the coffee is excellent, and the master that the liqueurs are of the first quality.

XX. To entertain a guest is to make yourself responsible for his happiness so long as he is beneath your roof. (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, pp. 13-4).

These aphorisms explain the realm of order that Brillat-Savarin envisages for the future discipline of the science of gastronomy. Symons (1998, p. 50) observes that the aphorisms express the same sense of order as Brillat-Savarin’s meal sequence; they “tend to follow his advice for the progression of the courses in a dinner, ‘from the most substantial to the lightest.’” However, the order and ordering potential of the aphorisms can be better understood by dividing the aphorisms into four categories that address food consumption at four distinct levels. The first set, aphorisms 1 to 4, explains the centrality of food to life, and how food habits are a major ordering device within culture. The second set, aphorisms 5 to 10, explain the relationship between the individual and eating. The third set, aphorisms 11 to 15, explains the proper structure and ordering principles of a meal which, drawing upon Symons’ observation, also chronicles the consistency of order at a deeper structural level. The fourth and final set, aphorisms 16 to 20, examines the concepts of hospitality and social interaction.

The construction of order within and by the aphorisms is important to understanding Brillat-Savarin and his creation of relationships and social hierarchies through his gastronomic worldview. Brillat-Savarin views food as central to life and society, a
shared social experience that is not simply an expression of an individual’s biological necessity nor individuality. Firstly, in the spirit of Elias’s ‘civilising process’, the aphorisms demonstrate the all-important movement from nature to culture, and the positioning of humans above nature but subservient to God. Ferguson (2004, p. 31) goes so far as to venture that the reason the book has enjoyed ongoing popularity is its direct link to the engaging manner in which Brillat-Savarin has presented this “culinary civilising process.” Secondly, for Brillat-Savarin it is through a reasoned approach to food that humans can demonstrate an engagement with and pursuit of an examined existence.

The aphorisms are designed as a set of instructional rules, giving class-based advice on engaging both the material (nature) and mental (culture) aspects of eating in a leisured manner. Through this conscious development of God’s gift of appetite and taste, Brillat-Savarin offers a vehicle to experience an examined existence. Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 295) explains that his book has “a ‘double purpose’, firstly, to set forth the basic theories of gastronomy, that it might assume the rank among the sciences which is incontestably its own, and, secondly, to defend gourmandism from the gluttony and intemperance with which it has for so long and so unfortunately been linked.” He develops a persuasive argument that gastronomy, when interpreted as an expression of the dialectic between order and disorder and duality of life (mind/body), is a worthy ambition and a means to a meaningful existence.

**Gastronomy--a challenge from below?**

Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 50-56) suggests that gastronomy as a discipline emerged from history like other branches of folk knowledge, and is now ready to be incorporated into the sanctioned official system of learning, just as several other similar new sciences (Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 50) lists “stereotomy, descriptive geometry, and the chemistry of gases”) had been in the sixty years preceding the publication of his book in 1825. What had changed was that food knowledge, once the preserve of those belowstairs, had been fuelled by new understanding, emanating not from cooks but men of science. Food was becoming a suitable topic of serious study and was a subject that had caught the imagination of those in the salons. Food knowledge had taken an upward trajectory, moved from belowstairs to abovestairs,
from ‘disorder’ to ‘order’, and in this process was, becoming a source of cultural capital. This marks a dramatic hierarchical shift, as a ‘low’ concept is appropriated by the middle class and increasingly linked to elements of order traditionally associated with ‘high’ culture, while maintaining social difference from the now devalued aristocratic ‘high’ culture.

It was Brillat-Savarin’s desire that this appropriated domain of knowledge, in the form he envisaged, would one day further develop into a fully-fledged discipline within the academy. Initially, he foresaw that it would commence with salon meetings between theorists and practicing artists, privately financed by a rich gastronome; eventually, it would be studied at universities and by professors, and government funding would facilitate the scholarly pursuit of the science of food. This development describes a symbolic meeting of the duality, mind and hand, and the shift in power Elias (1994) identifies from local to central, associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie. To make this transgression the discipline would have to travel from ‘low’ to ‘high’, picking up all-important legitimacy, formality, governance and the right to confer inclusion upon individuals deemed worthy. For Brillat-Savarin, formal acceptance within the hegemonic structure of society was an important development if gastronomy was to exert its civilising influence on both individual and society.

**Brillat-Savarin’s definition of gastronomy**

Brillat-Savarin’s (1970, p. 52) concept of the emerging discipline embraced substantially more than the simple enjoyment of ‘good food’. His definition befitted his food-centric worldview. “Gastronomy is the reasoned comprehension of everything connected with the nourishment of man.” Food was not merely fuel for the body or material pleasure, but formed the nucleus of a structuring device for providing a desired and ordered society. The very word ‘gastronomy’ illustrates this ordering property from the concepts of *gastro* (stomach) and *nomos* (law). Finding ordered pleasure in food and at table was important for Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 160-171) and part of what he believed was nature’s design for mankind. Gastronomy was all-encompassing, relating to all things and all peoples and impacting on all facets of life. Brillat-Savarin’s definition vertically integrates the horizontal chain of
relationships inherent in meals, as expressed by Douglas (1975, p. 257: “the smallest, meakest meal metonymically figures the structure of the grandest, and each unit of the grand meal figures again the whole meal – or the meakest meal”) and Bakhtin (1984, p. 278: “banquet for all the world”) to include production as well as consumption. Also intrinsic to the definition is a moral judgement that seeks to lay a doctrine of gastronomy: “It attains this object by giving guidance, according to certain principles, to all who seek, provide, or prepare substances which may be turned into food. Gastronomy, in fact, is the motive force behind farmers, vinegrowers, fishermen, and huntsmen, not to mention the great family of cooks, under whatever title they may disguise their employment as preparers of food” (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, p. 52).

Brillat-Savarin was aware of the civilising influence that food had already brought to humanity. Since the deepest mists of time the act of eating together in a spirit of hospitality has been one of social pleasure and a driving force in the civilising process. The forward march of culture began with the sharing of the kill. Language, hospitality, rites and rituals have all been generated out of the social act of eating. Gastronomic eating is not feeding to satisfy hunger but rather a pleasure in the satisfaction of duality, firstly of the body but simultaneously of the intellect. But this pleasure derived from gastronomy was also perceived as a threat to order if not moderated by the moral force implied within his definition.

Brillat-Savarin was adamant that the pleasure must not transgress into the realm of excess, that moderation or self-control was central to gastronomy being seen as civilised. This perspective highlights gastronomy as an embodiment of the ideas captured within Elias’s civilising process. Within Brillat-Savarin’s (1970, p.132) philosophy, gourmandism “is an impassioned, reasoned, and habitual preference for everything which gratifies the organ of taste. Gourmandism is the enemy of excess; indigestion and drunkenness are offences which render the offender liable to be struck off the rolls.” This threat of excess, whether actual or perceived, has been and remains a constant threat to gastronomic order, capable of generating a misinterpretation of gastronomy as an attack on the values of the bourgeoisie. Gastronomy treads a fine line between refinement and excess, remaining reliant on a call to ‘reasoned comprehension’ for differentiation. Spang (2000, p. 156) ventures
that it is this very value that separates gastronomy from previous forms of eating. On a social hierarchy its bourgeois values are evident, having been positioned above the excess and gluttony associated with natural animal instinct, but remaining below pretentious aristocratic delicacy.

**Gastronomy--a product of its terroir**

While gastronomy may eschew excess, it is reliant on conditions of excess for its very existence. For gastronomy there needs to be food in sufficient quantity, variety and quality, that choice and cultural capital can be exercised. Mennell (1985, pp. 23-4), taking a step further back, suggests that it was the existence of sufficient food that alleviated the oscillation between feasting and famine, thus forming a prerequisite for the ‘civilising process’.

Gastronomy was a product of its time and the French environment, of a society ordered by the structures of modernity, increasingly governed by the values of the bourgeoisie and progressively divorced from the culinary hegemony prevalent under the Ancien Régime. In the chapter *On Gourmandism*, Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 133-40) advances the benefits of gourmandism, which serve to illuminate the structure of society and to demonstrate how closely gastronomy is tied into Elias’s formation and identity of the nation state.

Brillat-Savarin viewed gourmandism as the heart of the political and fiscal economies, with a far-reaching effect. It was the major catalyst uniting the nations of the world in the global reciprocal exchange of food commodities. Food was thus not a frivolous topic. Food was responsible for international trade, was a chief mainstay of every nation’s wealth, drove the price structures of commerce, created jobs; it could even be seen at work outside its direct sphere through its economic multiplier effect.

It was not just economic benefits that were directly linked to the gourmand’s influence. For Brillat-Savarin, as he articulates in the third aphorism, food is a surface representation of the deeper structures and values of society. In the form of a cuisine, food can be used as a sign of a nation state, expressing group identity and
articulating a common bond that reinforces the chains of relationships. Food simultaneously reflects the order and orders the State.

To emerge in the form that Brillat-Savarin advocated, gastronomy needed to incorporate the dramatic changes that were currently shaping French society. The rise of rationalism in the form of science offered hope for Brillat-Savarin. His book is written in the style of scientific discourse, presenting ‘facts’, information presented without paradox. In the manner of science, gastronomic tests and experimentation are employed to uncover ‘truths’. Brillat-Savarin hoped the study of food, when linked to the rigours of the scientific method, would result in legitimate knowledge, lifting itself above the level of ‘folk’ wisdom. Barthes (1985, p. 72) was moved to declare that “Science is the great superego of Physiology.” Brillat-Savarin saw a future tied to the new order of his society. His gastronomy actively embraced science, commerce and consumption and was global in its outlook. It represented the progress of his world. If the meal had traditionally offered a symbolic view of a society in miniature, then the gastronomic meal was a symbol of a new world: “a well-ordained banquet seems like an epitome of the world, every part of which is duly represented” (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, p. 54).

Gastronomy was intimately linked to a reordering of society, a distancing and differentiation from the past, yet still connected to it, positioned at an interface between the past and future. Brillat-Savarin’s book provides an insight into this transition of order; gastronomy, saddled with an ambiguous mixture of old thinking mixed with the new. This ambiguity is evident in the explanation associated with the supremacy of taste afforded to man. Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 45-8) argued that man, created in the image of God, is the creature with the most perfect sense of taste. Opposing this, emerging scientific evidence is offered suggesting, this religious belief may be erroneous. The thought that some animals may have superior taste apparatus is however summarily dismissed. “This is unwelcome doctrine to our ears, and smacks of heresy,” exclaims Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 46). He then delivers a defence of the position of Christian faith, written in scientific language that reinforces the belief that man’s ability to taste is a gift from God. This example highlights the struggle between modes of thinking and the ordering of knowledge as
an expression of social change, and can be read as manifestation of the dialectic of order and disorder.

**Gastronomy and the individual**

With taste viewed as a gift from God, Brillat-Savarin outlines his gastronomic social hierarchy, which follows the trajectory of the primary binary, with the pursuit of gastronomy constructed as both an act of veneration and a means of demonstrating cultural capital through social competence. As a means of demonstrating cultural capital, gastronomy helps map the rise of individualism as a bourgeois construct. Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 141-54) explains the ordering categories in ascending rank, including gender constraints and bias, suggesting that not all people can achieve the desired goal of being a gourmand. One group of people is excluded because nature has not equipped it with the necessary physical refinement of the tongue. “The second class is made up of the absent-minded, the garrulous, the busybodies, the ambitious, and others who try to do two things at once, and only eat to fill their bellies” (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, p. 141). While some are excluded by birth, others are blessed by nature, predestined for a life of gourmandism. Another group of men is gourmand by virtue of its calling. According to Brillat-Savarin the four professions (finance, medicine, letters and religion) all produce great men of gastronomy with different qualities. However birth or profession alone is not considered enough to justify inclusion within the ‘honourable brotherhood’: proficiency in gastronomical tests must also be demonstrated. The tests acknowledge a class construct, accommodating the faculties and habits of the various classes of society, subjecting the applicant to the close scrutiny of the supreme council. With successful demonstration of gastronomic competency, inclusion or exclusion is bestowed and assignment within the hierarchy of rank completed. Like so much of the philosophy of gastronomy, the tests are about the creation and recognition of a sense of hierarchical order. While the tests are class-based and acknowledge the ordering potential of other structuring devices within society (such as money, for example), there is also an effort to acknowledge that taste can be identified outside of a simple class or hereditary hierarchy. Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy represents the new social order, where social standing is an exercise in the individual’s demonstration of cultural and/ or economic capital, thus recognising a dual social order. What Brillat-
Savarin is proposing the formalisation and legitimation of food as a vehicle for social competition in the field of conspicuous consumption.

Gastronomic competence is dependent not only on possession of gastronomic knowledge but also on the ability to demonstrate this as a social superiority to others. Barthes (1985, pp. 73-4) is critical of Brillat-Savarin’s modest culinary sociology, not for the originality of acknowledging that taste (culture) is socialised, but because he omits a discourse on the food of the poor. Brillat-Savarin, like Elias, has constructed his paradigm on an aspirational top-down, middle-class view of society. While there is no direct discussion in a manner that would please Barthes, the food habits of popular culture are implicit in Brillat-Savarin’s construction of hierarchies.

His gastronomic culture can only be identified by acknowledging that gastronomy was generated out of ‘low’ culture, and then referenced back and distanced from it. Brillat-Savarin’s fourth aphorism, and the most famous—“Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are”—is clear indication that he understands that food habits are a product of socialisation and that the food code can be read to reveal social constructs of order. Importantly, within Brillat-Savarin’s construct (which anticipates the work of Bourdieu), food behaviours become a marker of the individual, helping to structure a representation of the self, with gastronomy facilitating a self-made construct rather than one simply granted by hereditary. This creation of order through classification is a central theme and strength of Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy. Ferguson (1998, p. 619) puts this succinctly: “In Brillat-Savarin’s work, the science of human nourishment – gastronomy--becomes something more--a science of society.”

While aspirational, in terms of the civilising process gastronomy places the individual in an ambivalent position. Unlike social activities that allow a central object of consumption, eating is a highly individualist activity. A piece of music can be heard by several people at the same time, a painting can be viewed by several people at the same time; eating is solitary. We cannot share the same food; we can only share the social situation. It is the social situation that is facilitated by the presence of the food that is consumed. It is not the actual eating but the dining together that is consumed. Dining is a cultural display and as such is rule-bound to
govern interaction between individuals. What then become important are the displays of competence within the aesthetic: behaviour governed by rules of the displays of cultural capital. The eating of a meal together is not just a social event but also a cultural competition. Unlike other areas of displays of cultural capital, within dining the individual is subservient to the group’s needs. As Elias (1978) noted, society has increasingly valued individualism, but the manner of eating is not used by the people higher up the social ladder as a marker of individualism in the same manner in which fashion is used. Simmel (Symons, 1998, p. 289) uses the example of the symbolism of the plate to explore this concept. In contrast to the communal bowl of the primitive, the plate represents individualism. The shape is circular, the most isolating shape clearly marking off the individual portion. The plate symbolises order, delineating the amount and elements allocated to the individual and providing a boundary to that of others. Yet the plate elevates the individual upward into a higher formal community where all plates should be identical, thus eliminating any form of individualism.

**The restaurant as an expression of the new social order**

The accepted rules of eating may inhibit the use of food as a marker of individualism but the setting for and accoutrements of consumption can be employed to compensate for this. About 1770, according to Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 267), the logical extension of this accessorising of eating was the construction of a purpose-built dining salon, ‘a restaurant’, that offered not only food but catered to the experience and spectacle of dining. Judged by Brillat-Savarin to be superior to the existing opportunities of eating away from home, these new and, in his opinion, underrated institutions offered anybody with the money the possibility of dining in a splendid manner. Recognising that restaurant dining has a democratising effect, Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 272) praises restaurants for opening up the pleasure of dining to those who are not wealthy. He reserves special praise for the restaurateurs who pursue their commercial success by combining “good cheer with economy, and by catering for modest incomes, which necessarily predominate, to make sure of attracting large numbers.” This early version of the mass-market restaurant was achieved, Brillat-Savarin notes, by the fixed price offering of inexpensive substances that could be reasonably appetising, thus making “good cheer available at moderate
price, and even cheaply” (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, p. 272). For Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 269), the restaurant represented more than the gourmand’s paradise, offering a cosmopolitan range of new taste pleasures. The restaurant represented a new social order where the middle classes, through their consumption, symbolically overturn the dominance of the aristocracy. Gone from the table was the central pot from which one helped oneself; this was replaced by the individual plate. As Symons (1998, p. 290) argues, “With the restaurant, artistic creation became the individual plate. In one blow, high quality became publicly available; even more significantly, cooking/sharing was individualised.”

Central to the restaurant experience is the concept that restaurant dining is a strictly commercial transaction that suits the emerging middle-class order, the mercantile exchange offering an altered dynamic from the master-servant relationship that had previously existed. The cook and diner were both granted a new freedom to engage in a modern consumer relationship that developed the structuring of behaviour noted by Finkelstein (1989). Symons (1998, pp. 290-03) suggests that this restaurant experience helped foster the emergence of the sovereign consumer. Restaurants had become gastronomic theatres, the drama generated by the spectacle of people eating in public, the gaze upon and experience of conspicuous consumption.

But dining as theatre, as Finkelstein (1989) demonstrated, means that the choice of restaurant can be easily read as a marker of an individual, signifying a corresponding level of cultural capital. Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 269- 70) was seemingly aware of this labelling, going to some lengths to describe the actors and their performance on the restaurant stage, interpreting their projected image of the ‘self’. Within the restaurant, the provision of food reflects the order of modernity and the emerging consumer society where the ‘self’ is projected by reference to consumption practices.

The widespread social changes of Brillat-Savarin’s day meant that urban life was changing. There was a more democratic access to and interest in gastronomic pleasure, not only in relation to restaurants, but cities such as Paris also offered an increasing range of specialist retail food operations. Brillat-Savarin is conscious that his gastronomy needs this new level of industrialisation to succeed, international trade to bring novel comestibles, the army of specialists’ trades and professions
associated with the preparation of food—all these must be in place to help shift eating
towards gourmandism. This increase in the industrialisation and commercialisation
of food retailing helps generate a climate of commercial rivalry, which proves a vital
force in propelling gastronomy forward. Gastronomy, in the form that Brillat-Savarin
advocates, provides the platform for an instruction in taste from those who have a
vested interest in the particular needs and structures of commerce.

To stay commercially competitive, providers and consumers are driven to seek out
means of differentiation. Restaurants catered not simply to specific market segments
but sought to offer some form of novelty—not just novelty of food, whether new
ingredients, different combinations, more interesting presentation or better
demonstration of cooking techniques, but novelty in every aspect of the meal
experience. This differentiation, linked with the restaurant’s ability to signify a
diner’s cultural capital, led to the development of systems of categories and
hierarchies of restaurants. This categorisation – central to gastronomy – was initially
informal. Over time, it generated a commercial genre of instructive writing
(including restaurant reviews and gastronomic journalism) that opened the meal
experience up to an audience outside those at table. Restaurants became not only
dining establishments but also a stage for the drama that is literary gastronomy. Food
writing was driven not only by the restaurants’ need to stay novel, but also by the
media’s need to present new stories in each publication, thus reinforcing the concept
of change, a distancing from the past, as a central element in gastronomy.

**Gastronomic time – a duality of order**

This central theme of Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy can be seen to reflect the
dominant social order and linear conceptualisation of time that defines Lévi-Strauss’s
‘hot’ society. Time, as Brillat-Savarin’s aphorisms highlight, was an important social
construct, acting as both culinary marker of the passage of time, just as Douglas
(1975) observed in the ordered sequencing of courses, and as a coordinating
mechanism helping to synchronise the work of the cook with the pleasure of dining.

The ritual of having meals together, while based on the body’s biological need,
generates a temporal regularity, a demonstrated conquest of naturalism and an
important advance from nature toward culture. This movement also heralds the broader social transformation of the concept of time from a ‘cold’ society’s cyclical construct of time, to a ‘hot’ society’s linear abstraction. The transformation from ‘cold’ to ‘hot’ society can be mapped gastronomically, as the principal method of food ‘work’ moves from hunter-gather through agrarian to industrial. This change in work practice, as Mennell (1985, pp. 20-39) argued, is at the heart of the civilising process.

This reading of gastronomic time as linear time highlights the dominant construct of time, as it reflects and structures the order of our ‘hot’ society. We still experience time at a secondary level in relation to the cyclical construct. Gastronomic time is marked by this duality, as indicated by Brillat-Savarin in his aphorisms. Numbers 16 and 17 stress, through the self-control required for punctuality, the values of linear time as an ordering mechanism, while aphorisms 7 and 8 recognise a temporal quality to gastronomic time as an appreciation of the here and now. Gastronomic time becomes an expression of duality and the ambiguity of the primary binary; on one hand cyclical, agrarian, and linked by food to nature and as an expression of Bakhtinian festivity. Alternatively and simultaneously, gastronomic time is linear, linked to the ordered culture of a ‘hot’ society, marking the ritual celebration of social organisation and cohesion, working as a coordinating mechanism capable of bringing people together in both work (the production of food), and leisure (the convivial consumption of food). Gastronomic time in leisure has the temporal quality of the freely chosen lived experience, a ‘self time’ that stands in opposition to obligated time. Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 265) suggests a binary division of the day, with daylight hours devoted to business and the remainder to the pleasures that accompany and follow the feast. Gastronomic time can therefore be understood as ambivalent, creating both cultural order and remaining ordered by nature, a representation of the dialectic between order and disorder and the duality of order. Both linear and cyclical constructs of time contribute to the concept of gastronomy, both helping to structure gastronomy as order and disorder.
The meal as order

Gastronomy as a structuring mechanism is evident in Brillat-Savarin’s prescription, with the third group of aphorisms, 11 to 15, focusing on his desired order for a meal. Here his ordering principles both acknowledge the existing structures that he is familiar with and attempt to superimpose his edict upon the prevailing order. In Brillat-Savarin’s ordering of the meal, we detect Douglas’s (1975, p. 261) notion that the “meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies.” Simply, a meal must fit the conceptual category of ‘meal’. This categorising takes place within and is consistent with the broader social system of order, enabling the meal to be read from a structuralist perspective as a surface representation of the deeper social structures.

By offering instruction on the desired formation of the meal, Brillat-Savarin is imitating the instructional literature that provided the source material for Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* (1994). The effect is the same: the codification of civility, of what is considered to be a proper meal. This includes the concept of self-control and moderation, and the process of codification provides a standard against which all other meals can be interpreted.

Brillat-Savarin’s dictum acknowledges and tries to reproduce particular hierarchies of order. His meal is culturally specific and serves to reinforce French culinary hegemony. Issues of class and class perspective are also inherent to the prescription of what he thinks the meal should resemble. Brillat-Savarin has imposed his bourgeois construct and therefore does not address the phenomenon of the lower classes, using food as a means to challenge the hegemony that is articulated by Bourdieu and Bakhtin. Brillat-Savarin does challenge the existing hegemonic order in his attempt to reposition food knowledge from ‘low’ to within the ‘high’ of the academy. This turns the gastronomic meal into a sign of the rise and increasing dominance of bourgeois values, thus reinforcing larger hegemonic structures within society.
Hospitality – an act of order and disorder

In the fourth set of his aphorisms, aphorisms 16 to 20 Brillat-Savarin, addresses the ritual act of hospitality as a means of forging or maintaining chains of relationships and of ensuring cooperation between people. In stressing the importance of hospitality, including the ritual roles and duties of host and guest, Brillat-Savarin (like Rabelais) is drawing on the long Homeric and Christian tradition of moral obligation to the ‘stranger’, who, in this instant, is charged with a symbolic sacredness. Hospitality is thus constructed as a ritual act of thanksgiving that symbolically recognises the stated relationship between God(s) and humans, with food being used to signify the gifts of nature which God(s) have bestowed upon us.

Hospitality is not a simple act of charity, however, but an act that must contain a theme of reciprocity; it is about the creation of a shared personal experience. Here food provides a useful, biological necessity, and symbolic means of facilitating an exchange of goods and services, and a pleasurable and convivial experience. The social act of hospitality is dynamic, an expression of the order and disorder dialectic, charged with the possibility of change while it reconfirms existing social structures. New relationships can be established or existing bonds strengthened. By participating in the common experience, both parties consent to a transgression of a temporarily shared mutual moral universe. Hospitality thus creates a new order. The stranger is brought across boundaries of exclusion, from disorder to order. Here Douglas’s (1975) sense of the creation of intimacy is clearly expressed. The sharing is a symbolic announcement that a transition has taken place and the stranger is structurally transformed. Hospitality acts as a form of gatekeeping, marking social boundaries and facilitating cross-border movement. Strangers become familiar, adversaries are transformed into comrades, friends into greater friends, and outsiders into insiders. Hospitality is thus naturally hopeful in outlook, offering an optimism that arises from this new order and the potential of these new relationships.

It is within this notion of hospitality that the shift in locus, between the love of consumption of good food and the gastronomic approach to food, can again be seen. The pleasure of eating is an individual and personal pleasure. The emphasis on hospitality as stressed by Brillat-Savarin shifts the focus to the social aspects of

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dining, the shared experience with the ‘other’. Implicit is the understanding of social networks and the development of order driven by thoughtful gastronomic consumption. The gastronomic table maps the desired world in miniature. This is then read as both the world structuring the meal and the meal providing the order to structure the world. Here Brillat-Savarin’s view can be seen as an echo of Rabelais (Book 4, Chapter 61) in relation to Messere Gaster. Food is the ordering structure of life: all things revolve around food, and the way the world is organised is the result of our food habits. Brillat-Savarin is hoping to extend this concept through acts of hospitality, by prescribing a means of eating that will order a desired world.

**Gastronomy--inclusive or elitist?**

While Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy is constructed as ordering structure in society, it can also be interpreted as an example of disorder in society. Gastronomy by its very nature must be confined to a liminal area of culture, somewhere between a rational restrained order and a passionate disorder. To achieve the acceptance and legitimation that Brillat-Savarin advocated, gastronomy must perform a delicate balancing act. It must be elitist, but simultaneously democratically supported by a base of popular endorsement of the core values of gastronomy. Gastronomy is reliant on the construction of a social hierarchy that facilitates gastronomes’ demonstration of their superior knowledge as cultural capital. Thus any status derived from gastronomy can only be achieved as an expression of a dominant and dominated relationship. The cultural capital is only generated by the continual subordination of a large percentage of the population.

Eating, gastronomically speaking, must be subjected to means of differentiation that have the effect of projecting gastronomy upward, away from nature, towards a higher culture status. This leads to two ends: on one hand, an attempt is made to convert people to gastronomy, by extolling its virtues (the ability to “eat” a better world), on the other, a diligent effort is made to exclude. Brillat-Savarin’s (1970, pp. 155-59) proposed gastronomic tests provide a useful example of one formalised means to accomplish this end. Proficiency in the exam sees the successful candidate rewarded with acceptance and inclusion within the ranks of the brotherhood, while failure marks one as “unworthy of the honours and the pleasures involved” and therefore as
one to be excluded. Even on inclusion, Brillat-Savarin’s recognition of taste as a class construct, and the compilation of different grades of tests based on income, creates categories and the formation of an internal social hierarchy marking boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

The division between those included and those excluded is reinforced by Brillat-Savarin’s tantalising suggestion of information about the deliberations by the supreme council on the very nature of the tests. While Brillat-Savarin expresses regret that the public is excluded from these very interesting discussions, he quickly reminds the reader that these proceedings must of course remain shrouded in mystery. Here we witness the provision of some information as a means of strengthening the popular understanding of gastronomy, while the withholding of information serves to highlight the boundary of exclusion. Order is created by regulation and authority but gastronomy must embrace disorder and constantly destabilize the status quo, setting itself apart, to maintain its readily identifiable and excluding boundary.

**Gastronomy--reasoned comprehension or pleasure of the flesh**

The balancing act is carried further by recognising that gastronomy is perceptually linked with excess and must continually be seen to differentiate itself from gluttony. Brillat-Savarin goes to great lengths to explain the difference between the top-down gastronomic approach to eating and the bottom-up approach of the glutton. Gastronomy’s differentiation from gluttony is reliant on two value-laden relationships: the stated application of intellect over body, and the concept of self-control over excess. This position is clearly articulated by Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 13) in his second aphorism: “Animals feed: man eats: only the man of intellect knows how to eat” and the tenth aphorism: “Drunkards and victims of indigestion do not know how to eat or drink”.

The appeal to ‘reasoned comprehension’ that forms a cornerstone of Brillat-Savarin’s definition of gastronomy stands in stark contrast to the traditional perception in Western society (structured by the values of the primary binary) that food is too trivial a subject for academic thinking. This disparity highlights the duality expressed
by the academy as a sign of order and the perceived disorder of gastronomy. Symons (1991, pp. 66-70) provides a trace of the history of this reasoning back to Plato’s anti-gastronomic philosophy, which situates food as a ‘low’ branch of learning. For Plato food and eating are associated with the biological act and a material world of change and decay. Thus, a focus on food is improperly concerned with the transient pleasures of the body rather than paying proper attention to the uplifting virtues of the mind.

This same moral outlook was repeated by Rabelais in the Messere Gaster episode, with an appeal to self-control and adherence to an austere moral outlook restated as the desired form of order. Symons (1991, p. 76) argues the Church also reuses the same Platonic argument:

The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed cannot’ (Romans 8:7). Accordingly, he favours self-discipline; like an athlete seeking an imperishable wreath, ‘I pommel my body and subdue it’ (1 Corinthians 9:25-27). Discussing the ‘man of dust’ versus the ‘man of heaven’, St Paul decrees: ‘Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable’ (1 Corinthians 15:50).

This position is a recurring theme within Christian thinking, as Symons demonstrates, with later Christian writers also taking up the argument that links food with the pleasure of an inferior, fleeting, mortal world.

Throughout history, food has been traditionally linked in a series of order creating binary oppositions with the pole value, nature. This association is contrasted to the opposing value, culture which is traditionally associated with the value of being more God(s) like. The result is that within Western society an entrenched view of food equates all aspects of food with the ‘low’. To demonstrate higher levels of culture a distancing from food must occur simultaneously with a grappling of the problem of the biological necessity of eating. Brillat-Savarin’s desire is, through the application of the rationality of science, to overturn history by honouring the mind/body duality within gastronomy. However, he remains constrained by the structure of order which specifies that the mind must dominate. This requires gastronomic thinking about
food to shift from thoughts about satisfaction of the body, to the contemplation of the meaning of a life structured by the ordering principles of eating. In this format gastronomy can offer a vehicle for an examined existence. The ‘low’ cultural value normally associated with food is inverted, to be replaced with a ‘high’ cultural value by investing food with the ‘high’ values associated with the rational scientific mind and with the God-given. “O taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Psalm 34:8).

Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 160-71) concedes that food does provide opportunity for the satisfaction of bodily pleasure, devoting his fourteenth meditation On the Pleasures of the Table to explaining that man, because of the pain he is subjected to by nature, must seek out the few pleasures that nature has placed within reach. But the pleasures of gastronomy are small, selfish pleasures. “Gastronomy examines taste as an organ of both pleasure and pain; it has discovered the gradual increase of excitement to which taste is liable, regulated the rate of that increase, and fixed upon a limit beyond which no self-respecting person should go” (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, p. 53). Pleasure is found in part by satisfying the physical aspect of taste, however this bodily pleasure remains fleeting in the main and is insufficiently satisfying. The pleasure of gastronomy is found in strict control and its challenge to the physical pleasure of eating. The mind must dominate and hold in check the pleasures of the body. The pleasures must be planned, small, cumulative over a life time--not wildly orgasmic pleasures that are fleeting and thus highlight a differentiation to the pleasures of the flesh. The pleasure of gastronomy is structured by a reliance on order while simultaneously drawing strength from minor transgressions into the realm of disorder.

This liminality is restated in Brillat-Savarin’s preoccupation with timing as one of the ordering principles of the meal and within the concept of gastronomic time. The script of a meal requires a marked start and finish, an allegory for life with its birth and death. The time structure is linear, with the pleasures spaced and cumulative, spread over one meal and then extrapolated over a lifetime. This ‘good life’ is thus fatalistic in outlook and actively acknowledges mortality. In stark contrast are the pleasures of the body found in the carnivalesque, where cyclical time dominates and pleasure is unbridled in celebration of life. Barthes (1985, pp. 63-4) uses Baudelaire’s distain for Brillat-Savarin’s stance on wine to illustrate the twin
approaches to pleasure. For Brillat-Savarin, wine is food, part of the pleasure of table, not a mind-altering drug that allows escape. Wine must enhance the temporal pleasures of table. Drinking it must remain a vehicle for a demonstration of the self-control of the gastronome. However, wine does grant the gastronome some reprieve, helping to fuel the important communal practice of conversation. For Brillat-Savarin, wine must not be allowed to provide the means of transgressing the boundaries of excess, fuelling a stepping-away into another realm, as we witnessed in the writing of Rabelais. Wine must remain ambivalent, facilitating order while marking disorder. Here gastronomy must provide recognition of the boundaries that haunt it. For Brillat-Savarin, drunkenness and the grotesque body of the obese are constant dangers to the gastronome. They provide markers of the boundaries that must not be transgressed, but with which one may flirt.

The self-indulgence traditionally associated with food is countered by Brillat-Savarin’s construction of his worldview, which places gastronomy at the nucleus. Brillat-Savarin is then in a position to justify his personal pursuit of pleasure, a justification shaped by his artificially narrow view of the world. He marshals a moral and ethical view that allows the satisfying of his personal pleasure by recourse to justification of the wider social benefits, which he expresses in largely economic terms--benefits generated as a direct result of this consumption-driven lifestyle. While the gastronome is self-righteous in his or her position, constantly avoiding the realms of excess, the impression created focuses on the symbolically more powerful disorder and the transgressive elements of gastronomy. Barthes (1985, p. 62) points out that “Had BS written his book today, he most certainly would have considered this taste for food which he defended and illustrated as a perversion. Perversion, one might say, is the exercise of a desire which serves no purpose, such as that of the body given to lovemaking with no idea of procreation.”

This view of gastronomy as a perversion helps explain the ambivalent nature of gastronomy. It is seen as an indulgent activity that stands against the civilising process and simultaneously as a demonstration of cultural capital. Barthes (1985, p. 62) accuses Brillat-Savarin, “in an age when the bourgeoisie felt no social culpability,” of the “use of a cynical opposition: there is on the one hand, natural appetite, which is of the order of need, and, on the other, luxurious appetite, which is
of the order of desire.” Gastronomy is for Barthes a ritual ceremony, “whereby man celebrates his power, his freedom to burn his energy ‘for nothing’.” Yet unlike a sexual perversion that assumes a wild dark persona in transgression, gastronomy “always implies a good sort of friendly and gently obliging avowal which never departs from good manners” (Barthes 1985, p. 62).

The order created by this particular form of pleasure-seeking structures ambivalence into the gastronomic meal. While the gastronomic meal is formed in the image of all other meals, it does not celebrate in the manner of other meals. The gastronomic meal is not a celebration of the collective, a triumph of work over nature, a celebration of life in the manner of Bakhtin’s ‘banquet for the entire world.’ Unlike Rabelais and Bakhtin, Brillat-Savarin assumes that the world has already been conquered and is under the control of a gastronomic order. Nor does the gastronomic meal celebrate the status quo in the way that the official banquet celebrates a particular history and the current hegemony: the gastronomic meal celebrates a new desired form of cultured order.

The gastronomic meal provides a platform for the individual to engage in the solitary internal pleasure of tasting food, within the select social setting of like-minded individuals. The meal provides a spectacle for the individual, a means of blotting out difference and creating a hospitable unity within a select group. While democratic in principle for those at the table, gastronomy excludes others, yet seeks to include others in the ‘spectacle’ of eating through literature. The gastronomic meal seeks novelty to capture social capital, but the literature that describes the novelty then codifies and democratizes it. The gastronomic meal becomes ambivalent, serving individual needs of eating which attract a level of moral condemnation, and satisfaction of collective bourgeois needs. This simultaneously creates, reinforces and challenges social hegemony.

**Table talk – mind/body dialectic**

Table talk highlights the tension created by the order/disorder dialectic inherent in gastronomy--the purposeful intertwining of mind and body, as a symbolic statement of the duality of humans positioned between nature and culture. Eating and talking
together serve to emphasise the twin oralities of the mouth and are used here in this
gastronomic context to build a total mind and body experience designed to challenge
symbolically the accepted mind or body hierarchy, but still allow confirmation of the
superiority of the mind. The potential for transgression remains inherent in meals, as
Jeanneret (1991, p. 3) notes. This is structured by the food positioned between
abstemiousness and overindulgence, and talk between sobriety and drunkenness. For
Brillat-Savarin, adherence to the ordering principle of moderation is an overriding
concern, which orders his construct of the gastronomic meal and associated
discussion.

This moderation provides a means of differentiation: the talk at a gastronomic meal
is contrasted to the free speech that characterises Bakhtin’s (1984) banquet imagery.
Symons (1994, p. 343), writing as the gastronomer in his translation and commentary
of Simmel’s *The sociology of the meal*, notes Simmel’s suggestion “that dinner
conversation, too, must neither become too elevated nor flaunt its lowly origins.”
This approach demonstrates table talk’s consistency with the rules of hospitality,
where the talk must be such that the guest feels at ease. At table, talk should remain
the focus of attention; it should be talk for the sake of talking. The content of the
discourse must not be allowed to dominate; it is the conversation itself that must
assume importance, not the topic of discussion. Table talk must not transgress and
become an assertion of ‘truths’. But this tempered conversation has another ordering
role, according to Barthes (1985, p. 64); table talk, by maintaining focus on the
communal, prevents the individual from escaping into a world of his or her own.
Conversation must provide a diversion from the mind-altering drug of wine. From
Brillat-Savarin’s perspective, wine may provide a social lubricant, but its
consumption must be temperate enough to maintain the rationality of the
gastronome. The desired moderation and self-control inherent in gastronomy must be
persevered.

At table, a balance must also be maintained between the naturalism of eating and
cultural over-refinement. While this may seem like a gastronomic quest for order, the
reluctance to engage the mind at a level that transcends the genteel is in itself
destabilising. The idea that table talk is governed by rules of etiquette, that specify
that the conversation should not become overly serious, provides insight into another
aspect of gastronomy. Gastronomic table talk, while differentiated from the free speech of carnival banquets, does not preclude gastronomy; it is analogous to the celebrations of Carnival in taking the role of a structuring mechanism of social order. While different, a number of the outcomes are surprisingly similar. Both gastronomy and Carnival are pleasure-seeking worlds, domains unto themselves that suspend the grim reality for a period of time. Both are subject to accusation that they focus on the material life, an unhealthy worshipping of the belly: there is the created illusion of a temporary freedom. Just as Carnival is a shared social experience with no spectators and only actors, so too, at table, is gastronomy. A shared social experience, there is a democracy present at table, with all expected to participate and bound by the obligations and duties of hospitality. For a short time, participants are treated to a utopian view of the world, but unlike Carnival, gastronomy offers a bourgeois representation of utopia rather than a folk construction.

Both Carnival and gastronomy portray, through food, a world of plenty, a world of pleasure, a world with its own mode of speech, a world subject to its own rules. Both present a chance to flirt with transgressive elements of excess, drunkenness and the grotesque body. Gastronomic table talk, like Carnival, offers a means of focusing effort on the unimportant; it operates as a safety valve in a leisured society. It is diverting, an escape from real issues; it is protected by rules that allow it to remain frivolous and refuse to allow serious issues to surface. While Brillat-Savarin is petitioning for change and appears to request a challenge to conventional values, gastronomic table talk is a reminder that the challenge is subservient to a celebration of the increasing bourgeois social order and values.

**Conclusion**

Writing at a key moment in history, Brillat-Savarin was aware that his proposed new ‘science’ of gastronomy, while representing the rise of the bourgeois order still occupied a position at the margins of his society. Reminiscent of Rabelais, he articulated his concern that his book would not be taken seriously, going to similar lengths to explain the tone of the text and how it should be approached. Confident that gastronomy as a ‘science’ could deliver respectability and legitimacy, he argues a case for such recognition by the academy. Rationally, reflecting the rationalised
order of a ‘hot’ society, he states the case for gastronomy. He notes the centrality of gastronomy to life, the significant economic benefits and the democratic pleasures to be had, even going as far as praising those restaurants that cater cheaply for the masses. If the earthly benefits are not sufficient then there is a retreat, an appeal to a moral argument: that gourmandism shows implicit obedience to the commands of the Creator. Despite all that is praiseworthy, Brillat-Savarin is acutely aware that he must carefully explain the differences between the social quality of gourmandism and the vices of gluttony, given they seem so easy to confuse.

Gastronomy, in the form proposed by Brillat-Savarin, combines the twin historical narratives represented here by the signs of mind and body, and is thus ambiguously positioned, an expression of the primary binary relationship, embracing both the order inherent in the civilising process and the disordered nature of bodily pleasure. As a manifestation of bourgeois top-down order, gastronomy is also simultaneously a form of a genteel middle-class anarchy that challenges the status quo. By appealing to ‘reasoned comprehension’ of food and eating, Brillat-Savarin has constructed gastronomy as an embrace of the constant dialectic of order and disorder and of the duality of order.

For Brillat-Savarin, gastronomy offers a desired alternative future, not merely differentiated from the Ancien Régime nor a simple embrace of the triumph of order of the bourgeoisie. Gastronomy lays a foundation for an individual’s consumption practices to be a sign not only of their constructed taste, but also a vehicle to experience an examined existence. Gastronomy offers not only a new order but also the pregnant potential of disorder. Gastronomy advocates a means for all (Brillat-Savarin, 1970, p. 265) of stepping outside the old class boundaries and, based on the ability to demonstrate taste, of joining a symbolic struggle against the hegemony. Constructed upon class values, gastronomy offers a utopia--not the folk utopia of Bakhtin but a bourgeois utopia, an alternative for the future, claimed to be capable of providing economic benefit to all. Under Brillat-Savarin’s instruction, gastronomy offers modernity the chance to ‘eat a better world’.

The thesis now stands poised to examine the complexity and ambiguity of McDonald’s as one of the most powerful food symbols of the late twentieth century.
Working from the structuralist perspective, existing theory has been enhanced by bringing disorder to centre stage, and by recognition of the historical perspective of our ‘hot’ society. This has been achieved by recognition of two competing historical narratives, establishing a duality of order. The dominant narrative focused on Elias and witnessed the slow rise of the order of the bourgeoisie and their ‘civilising process’. The counter-narrative is associated with Bakhtin, and views disorder as an ever-present and positive force. Into these competing historical narratives two key moments of intersection are located and explored. The first, the books of Rabelais, are positioned at the interface between medieval ‘disorder’ and the coming order of modernity. The second, the work of Brillat-Savarin, is positioned in the early nineteenth century, at the interface marking the triumph of eighteenth-century rationalism and the demise of aristocratic ‘disorder’. In each of the two historical narratives and at each key moment, the order/disorder dialectic can be seen to play a different historical role. It is only by locating McDonald’s in these competing historical narratives and recognising the dialectical relation of order and disorder that the richness and complexity of McDonald’s as a food symbol can be decoded.
Part 3--the McDonald’s phenomenon

The thesis is now equipped to explore the ambiguity and complexity of McDonald’s as one of the most dominant food symbols of the late twentieth century. McDonald’s is positioned in the intersection of the two competing versions of history; in each the order/disorder dialectic has played a different role. The trace of the history of food is complete, as McDonald’s is situated at the thesis’s third key moment of history, the late twentieth century, Western society’s interface between modernity and post-modernity.

Located within the first narrative (as theorised by Elias), we witness McDonald’s as the symbol of the triumph of American middle-class values and capitalism, the epitome of the bourgeois order and the increasing rationalisation of order that characterises a ‘hot’ society. Alternately, within the counter-narrative, McDonald’s is read as an expression of the triumph of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque folk culture, empowered by disorder, interpreted as a bottom-up challenge to the existing hegemonic order, an example of the entropy of a ‘hot’ society.

Using the advanced structuralist perspective that ‘pushes’ disorder to centre stage, and the recognition of a historical perspective, the thesis argues that McDonald’s as a food symbol communicates a complex and ambiguous message that is decoded in the fashion of the bricoleur, and thus open to different interpretations and (mis)understanding.

This section of the thesis concludes by advancing the inherent complexity of McDonald’s as a sign, by reflection upon the Slow Food movement. A double face of resistance emerges with Slow Food as the disorder to McDonald’s order, and the order to McDonald’s disorder.

The thesis argues that it is only by decoding McDonald’s with the knowledge of the continual and constitutive dialectic between order and disorder, and the duality of order, that the complexity of McDonald’s as a culinary sign can be understood. In turn, the process of decoding McDonald's as a sign, with reference to the
order/disorder dialectic, utilizes McDonald’s as a useful vehicle from which to understand not only the process of the construction of meaning in food, but, importantly, also to question the existing social order and pursue an examined existence.
Chapter 6--McDonald’s as social meaning

For Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 266-75), the new concept of the restaurant was more than just a gastronome’s paradise and a theatre of human spectacle. Restaurants were a product of his day, a sign of the values of the day and an expression of the rise of the power of the bourgeoisie. His concept of restaurants embraced the egalitarian spirit of the Revolution. Brillat-Savarin was even moved to offer special praise for restaurateurs who provided inexpensive meals for the masses. In the late twentieth century, America produced a restaurant that delivered meals for the masses on an unprecedented scale, a scale that would surely have astounded Brillat-Savarin. McDonald’s the hamburger restaurant has been so successful at catering for the masses that it has built a global corporation that is almost ubiquitous. But McDonald’s has become more than a restaurant chain, it has become a sign of our times. A product of late modernity, McDonald’s has achieved the status of signifier for social order, a metaphor for the dominant values of the day. How can McDonald’s be interpreted as a surface representation of our deeper structures?

Ethnography – a meal at McDonald’s

Brillat-Savarin found the need first to describe the restaurant’s spectacle, to familiarise his reader with his assessment of the then novel concept. In a similar vein, how can the contemporary McDonald's experience be described? The following is an auto-ethnographical account of one of the author’s experiences.

Heralding the restaurant from a distance, even at driving speed, the neon sign of McDonald’s--the trademark golden arches--stands out. The illuminated sign acts not only as a beacon, identifying the location of the restaurant and marking the existence of McDonald’s on the landscape, but also as a symbolic sign for all that the restaurant has come to signify.

This McDonald’s, in the western suburbs of Sydney, is surrounded by a sea of carpark, today a desolate tract of black, largely empty, bitumen marked by lines that regulate parking. The sheer amount of land given over to the carpark in comparison
to the actual size of the store, is indicative of just how interrelated the story of McDonald’s is with the culture of the car and the notion of suburbia. For those in an extra hurry, the car park is not the destination but a terrain to be negotiated as they manoeuvre into the drive-through, customers purposefully forced to slow down to enter the narrow and thus ordered entrance.

This particular McDonald’s restaurant is instantly familiar, despite the fact that I have never visited this specific store. The restaurant is a ‘non place’, familiar as local but simultaneously global, ubiquitous. The way forward is clear, the potential customer seemingly free to enter the restaurant unimpeded, and not hosted, by McDonald’s staff. Straight to the counter, stopping for a quick look at the overhead menu board. Why? Their menu is well-known, my choice of food was made long ago.

I take my place in the short queue in front of one of the cash registers. Finally, it is my turn at the counter, I order using the prescribed language. A Big Mac meal! The staffmember responds appropriately. The tray is dressed with a disposable paper mat, publicising the good work of the corporate-sponsored charity, Ronald McDonald house. The service counter has a number of related charity boxes, festooned with models of Ronald McDonald, where one can donate one’s change. The young staffmember stacks the tray with the Big Mac meal, hamburger, fries and Coke. I pay. Carrying my food to the table, I stop to pick up a straw and paper napkin from the nearby dispenser. I sit down at an empty table for four, table and chairs fixed to the floor. It is instantly noticeable just how uncomfortable the chairs are. You are not being encouraged to linger, the economics of the restaurant soon requires the table for the next customer.

The hamburger is packaged in a ring of cardboard and wrapped in a grease-proof paper wrap, printed with corporate logos and nutritional information I find difficult to read. The fries are presented in a paper ‘cup’. This packaging displays the food in a manner that evokes a sense of abundance but also serves to keep the food separate, individualised. Its protects the food as it travels the couple of metres from the kitchen through the service and customer areas to the table. I begin to eat by picking at the fries.
It is lunchtime, and the restaurant is busy, with a group of women with young children, people dressed for work in the uniforms of their respective trades. A mother with a young child allows her daughter a display of independence, ordering at the counter by herself. The counterstaff (they are trained to do this) make the child feel special, bending down to her level. Another child is allowed to pay, proudly waving a fifty-dollar note. A number of children observed purchase the McHappy meals. Here, the first priority on opening the packaging is the included toy, not the food. One father and daughter sit down at an adjacent table. The girl, about four years old had her McHappy meal. The first priority is to find the toy. When she begins to eat, she commences with her fries but quickly switches to ‘stealing’ her father’s fries. Judging by both their smiles, this simple act of transgression is treated as a great joke.

With my meal completed it is time to vacate the table, taking the waste packaging and depositing this in the clearly marked--and labelled using American vernacular--‘trash’ bins. It is time to leave some 15 minutes after entering the restaurant; McDonald’s offers fast-food for quick consumption. But as I leave others are entering, coming in to dine, a steady stream to keep the young staff occupied.

The staff are all relatively young, but not as young as some employed in shifts outside school hours. Their staff uniforms clearly designate the different role and station of staff, kitchen, counter and management. The addition of the radio headpiece, in a blatant display of technology, denotes the staff allocated to the drive-through. They seem to work hard, always rushing, maybe trying to impress management. There is evidence of a staff reward scheme, an awards board and different uniform badges.

In even this superficial examination of a McDonald’s experience, the order and control, that Finkelstein (1989) describes as shaping the restaurant experience, are obvious. To experience McDonald’s, the customer must adhere to his or her scripted role. With the first sighting of the golden arches, the script is acted out. The sign triggers the understanding of what is known and understood. It locates the restaurant and signals “to the prospective customer that the same standard of food and service and the same level of expense can be expected in any of the outlets” (Finkelstein,
1989, p. 94). It is this signalling of the known that helps to explain the popularity of McDonald’s, as it taps into a fear of the age. “The product is so well known that it is the uniformity and consistency found in the protocol and physical appearance of the restaurant that are the principal attractions of dining there” (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 97). At the base of this fear is, for Finkelstein, an indicator of what needs to be viewed as civilised within the context of our society. “The commonplace understanding of modern civility, then, is that it has a face of passive reserve which allows the individual to go here, buy this and try that without being too disturbed by the unexpected or untoward and without having to think too precisely about the purposes for such activity” (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 105). Here the tremendous pressure to conform to the accepted notion of order is illustrated. To engage in the McDonald’s experience, subservience to the McDonald’s order is required.

**McDonald’s as a product of its terroir—meeting changing needs.**

Dining at McDonald’s may require a capitulation to the restaurant’s form of order, yet the development of the corporation was reliant on challenging the status quo. The evolution of McDonald’s was a result of the dialectic between order and disorder, helping to produce a new form of restaurant operation.

“(T)he fast food sector represents a radical new conceptualization of the eating experience and as such characterizes or is part of an emergent tradition” (Shelton, 1990, p. 510). For Shelton, fast-food is a representation of America. Fast-food is linked with progress, standing in opposition to the ‘high’ cultural restaurant that is focused on the maintenance of the past, with “its notions of the connoisseur and hierarchical labor-diner relationships.” McDonald’s is a sign that represents progress and has become a part of the banality of the everyday. The question is thus: how did the fast-food sector break with tradition and set about this revolution in eating? How did McDonald’s move from being a symbol generated by the power of disorder, formed by the dialectic between order and disorder, to a symbol that represents the existing order of late twentieth-century Western society?

The McDonald’s restaurants and the genre Finkelstein (1989, pp. 93-7) labels “Fast-Food chain” restaurants grew out of the American social order of the first half of the
Belasco (1979), in his history of the rise of the ‘Howard Johnson’ restaurants, provides a comprehensive overview of the two major elements of American culture, he argues that these contributed to the birth and success of this genre of restaurant. The first is the changes brought by the Depression years and the second is the increased use of the automobile.

The breakdown of the social and economic way of life in the 1930’s caused a desperate intellectual quest for a common “American way of life.” Belasco (1979, pp. 503-4) argues that this was spurred on by a general hope: that is, that a sense of cultural unity would help reconstruct a shared sense of national identity and purpose. Producers of popular culture successfully took up this theme, which valued “commitment over criticism, conformity over individuality,” to stress the importance of “group participation, mainstream values, historical continuities and by the end of the decade, a conservative nationalism.” Here Belasco’s description of changes in American society articulates the same trajectory Elias describes in the ‘civilising process’ he locates in Europe. Social difficulties strengthened the monopoly of centralised control and, coupled with a rationalisation of society and the rise of the influence of the bourgeoisie, a more homogeneous society was generated. One manifestation of this standardising in America was the rise of now-familiar national brands of consumer products, such as Coca-Cola. This new-found Americanism was coupled with the second major catalyst, the new national symbol of technology and growing affluence, the automobile.

Initially, the increasingly widespread use of the automobile was viewed ambiguously, with what Belasco (1979, p. 504) suggests was a level of disquiet; here the car could be considered as an expression of disorder. This concern gradually inverted, with the automobile installed as a symbol that represented the order of emerging values of the American middle-class society. Embodying the pioneering spirit, the car, thanks to improved roads, offered a democratic sense of mobility and freedom. It created a car touring culture as millions of families piled into their cars for Sundays and summer holidays. In response to this popularity, small, independently-owned roadside businesses started to service the needs of the motorist directly; selling the emerging national brands these businesses formed a link that
united American and Americans into a road and consumer-centred community. For the travelling motorist, after petrol, food was the main consumer expenditure.

While motoring offered a taste of adventure, these tourists remained basically conservative in their approach to food. Belasco (1979) suggested that “National travel in a pluralistic society virtually required the establishment of a lowest common denominator in food, lest unification be inhibited” (Belasco, 1979, p. 505). And “In food, this meant a pleasant atmosphere, an uncontroversial menu and an absolute proscription of alcoholic beverages” (Belasco, 1979, p. 506). Within Belasco’s description, a set of expressions of the dialectic between order and disorder emerge. The mobility afforded by the car is in contrast to the desire for the home-like. The search for a sense of novelty is coupled with the desire for the familiar. The individual freedom of independent travel is countered by the democratic nature of the road experience. The escape from the city to the country is tempered by the desire for fast pace of travel, and the self-imposed time pressure of the motorist to ‘make time’. The car as a sign of technology is used to seek out representations of a bygone era. These sets of binaries help order the motoring experience and structure the food sought by the motorist.

The self-imposed time pressure drove the motorist to view the need to eat as similar to the need to put fuel into the car:

Food had to be cooked and served quickly, without fuss. Weary, schedule-minded tourists had no patience for gracious elegance. The demand for speed thus favoured self-service and fried food, which was the easiest to prepare (Belasco, 1979, p. 508).

This consumption of fried fast-food stood in contrast however to the nutritional and social etiquette of the day. Fast eating was considered a vulgar habit and fried foods generally unhealthy. By transgressing this wisdom, road food could help symbolise the stepping-away from the constraints of the everyday into the different realm that motoring afforded. Belasco (1979, p. 508), as if to reinforce the force of opposites, suggests that if the unhealthy aspects of road food offended, then the motorist could stock up on country “fresh vegetables, eggs, and milk along the way.” Whatever the sanctioned wisdom of the everyday, when on the road “motorists demanded food that
was fast, fried, fresh and filling, all served in an ambience that was family-orientated, informal, picturesque and quasi-democratic” (Belasco, 1979, p. 508).

The response of small business was varied, with several kinds of outlet developed to feed the motorist and the family. According to Belasco (1979, p. 508), three significant categories of establishments emerged: the tearoom, the food stand and the diner. While each catered to some of the needs of the motorist, it was the synthesis of all three that created a new restaurant concept that achieved what others had not; Howard Johnson’s was one such hybrid outlet, a precursor to McDonald’s. These fledgling fast-food restaurants were a product of their environments and can be read as an expression of the changing values and as a sign of a new social order.

It was with this building on the pioneering spirit of other fast-food operations that McDonald’s commenced, an occurrence that is underplayed in the corporate story of McDonald’s. The corporation’s official website presents, in fourteen anecdotes, a very brief history of the company. The site includes reference to Ray Kroc as the founder, his early development of some of the company’s icons, the listing on the stock exchange and finally links to the present, with the current share price, global expansion and the company’s presence on the world wide web. The narrative of the company’s genesis and its founder, Ray Kroc, are presented as a modern day hero’s tale. This corporate myth-making is placed into perspective by John Love (1986) in his book McDonald’s Behind the Arches, which is favourably disposed to the organisation. From Love’s more fulsome account, the corporation’s narrative is seen to reflect and hide the history, thus helping the corporation to create a desired version of order, one linked to a certain perception of technology, innovation and superiority. Kroc, despite his hero’s status, did not invent fast-food nor did he invent the self-service restaurant. His 1955 McDonald’s restaurant was neither the first McDonald’s nor the first franchised McDonald’s. As Love (1986, pp. 9-10) notes:

Somehow, the two brothers whose name adorns 9,300 McDonald’s restaurants have been all but washed out of the McDonald’s legend. In an age of mass media, the first one to mass market a new product is credited as its inventor. So it is not surprising that Kroc, who founded the company that took the fast-food concept to the masses,
is celebrated as the creator of the self-service, quick-service restaurant. It is not surprising, but it is not accurate.

Kincheloe (2002, pp. 50-1) views this example of the corporate writing of history as a particularly important insight into how McDonald’s operates at a social level, purposefully employing, in a manner reminiscent of Rabelais, the structure of the hero’s tale to elicit a desired response.

McDonald’s is a product of its time and place; McDonald’s is the manifestation of a company that has catered very successfully to an emerging need within the marketplace. A demonstration of the success of their achievement is the extent to which the operation has been increasingly imitated and, because of this imitation, has undergone a dramatic social and symbolic change. McDonald’s has emerged from a genre of new restaurants catering to a changing society, through the stage of being one example of existing order, to that of the signifier of the existing order. The success of this transformation has been incorporated as part of the product and experience sold, a representation of the values of the system that created the concept. Sold in the language of the existing order, the success of the bourgeoisie, the story of McDonald’s’ history has been mythologised to further intensify the ideology it is seen to represent. McDonald’s is offered as a sign to represent the ‘can do’ success of America in the twentieth century, and the rise of mass-market consumerism supplied by large-scale industrialised conglomerates.

The McDonald’s restaurant – dialectic of order and disorder

Restaurants are theatres for diners to act out a social role, an act of conspicuous consumption, and just as food communicates about the individual, Shelton (1990, p. 508), invoking the words of Levi-Strauss, argues that the orchestrated space of a restaurant can speak both of itself and of its role in the creation of the image of others. Restaurants, like food, must not only be good to consume but importantly be ‘good to think’.

By grouping similar images into categories, using a system of order that references the primary binary and preferences a French culinary hegemony, Finkelstein’s (1989)
restaurant typology places McDonald’s into the lowest status category of restaurant ‘convenience’ in the subcategory of ‘fast-food chain’. This position reflects the same value system used by Bourdieu (1984) in relation to expressions of economic and social capital. This reading reflects the values of the hegemony, linking dining at McDonald’s restaurants with low social capital, and empowering McDonald’s as a business with ‘high’ economic capital based on their market success. It is this ambiguous combination of ‘high’ and ‘low’ that endorses McDonald’s as a rich semiotic symbol.

Like all restaurants, McDonald’s, as my ethnography above illustrated, sells an experience which is more than the simple provision of food and service. McDonald’s’ awareness and focus on selling this branded themed experience can be traced back, Love (1986, p. 305) suggests, to Kroc, who articulates in one of his old homilies: “We’re not in the hamburger business; we’re in show business.” The global brand is built on the consistent repetition of a restaurant experience that follows a particular scripted form of order. As Bryman (2003, p. 156) notes, the brand “is expressed in the corporate decoration, modes of service delivery, staff clothing, and various architectural cues that are pervasive features of these establishments.” Despite the highly controlled and scripted order, a McDonald’s restaurant still remains an open text, subject to uncontrollable readings constructed in the fashion of the bricoleur, capable of taking the various scripted elements and reconstructing his or her own meaning of the McDonald’s experience. This is particularly evident in the use of McDonald’s as a surface representation of the order of twentieth century American culture or capitalism.

Boym (2001) reminds us that an initial differentiation set McDonald’s apart from the traditional restaurant, despite its now being viewed as a sign of the everyday:

At the outset of the twenty-first century, in an age of theme restaurants, the idea of having fun while eating seems obvious. It was not so when the McDonald brothers started their enterprise (Boym, 2001, p. 7).

This particular difference is augmented by alignment and an appeal to desired elements of emerging American values. Boym (2001) reads the social order that
facilitates the middle-class embrace of the automobile as central to McDonald’s success, its love affair with technology:

Less often commented upon, however, is the fun component of all this necessary and unnecessary mechanization. Here, in my opinion, lies the real secret to McDonald’s popularity, because Americans love to play with things industrial, mechanical, and technological (Boym, 2001, p. 7).

McDonald’s has also consciously sought to use American middle-class values, such as flag, family or cleanliness, to market itself, inextricably linking brand McDonald’s with brand USA. This relationship is not value neutral and while the corporation’s desire is to link itself with revered American symbolic elements to create a desired form of order, it must be remembered that in a ‘hot’ society such rationalisation of order can also generate a disorder that will seek to challenge and threaten this order.

The type of threat generated by this particular order/disorder dialectic has been sufficiently important for the corporation to attempt to neutralise some of the desired American nationalism in their overseas operations, by symbolically localising its restaurant experience. Links with the local milieu have become part of the corporate strategy; to help assimilate the restaurant into a local area, however, the local environment aids the process by imposing itself back onto the McDonald’s model of order. The result of this dialectic is tension between local and global, however any generated disorder must be dealt with in a manner that supports the status quo.

For Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 269-70), the focus of the restaurant spectacle was his fellow customers. For Shelton (1990, p. 520), “The spectacle of McDonald’s is work: the chutes filling up with hamburgers; the restaurant and the other diners are secondary views.” This stands in contrast to other types of restaurants where the cooking is hidden from view, drawing upon the principals of the ‘civilising process’ to elevate the status of a diner, distancing him or her from the traditional ‘low’ of food preparation. At McDonald’s, for Shelton, the values of the spectacle are inverted: the manufacturing process, the Fordist delivery of the fast-food product is the desired subject of gaze. The open kitchen becomes a celebration of the American love of technology, an appeal to modernity, granting an elevated status to the
industrial and, by default, inverting the prestige normally bestowed upon the artisan chef.

George Ritzer (1993) lends a different guise to this focus on ways of working. He uses the differentiated form of work found at McDonald’s—as compared to traditional food service operations—to develop a thesis about rationalisation. Ritzer identified four core elements of McDonald’s method of working: efficiency, predictability, calculability and control, through the exchange of non-human for human technology. Ritzer then extrapolates this new form of order, which he labels the “McDonaldization process,” to argue that this particular form of McDonaldised order has begun to shape order in broader society. This selection of McDonald’s as the sign of a new method of work seems an appropriate representation of social order. Ritzer has simply followed the historical tradition of symbolism by using a prominent food-related symbol to symbolise the means of work, by highlighting the production of food.

The order that Ritzer distinguishes in McDonald’s is an articulation of the order and control that Finkelstein viewed as integral to the construct of restaurants, and, more generally the order that drives Elias’s the ‘civilising process’. Subservience to order, and resulting incivility, seem particularly evident in the case of McDonald’s: as evidenced in the ethnography, what is on offer is highly scripted; it is also, Watson suggests (1997, p. 27), implicit in the contract between company and customer. For Watson, the individual customer must accept, conform and actively perform along with the orchestrated sense of order to navigate the regulated and standardised experience. In return, he suggests the masses are rewarded with fast-food meals, with their attendant speed, reliability, low cost and experience.

This requirement to conform to prescribed behaviour, in order to navigate McDonald’s, is discussed by a range of authors. They document the debut of McDonald’s into other cultures, where educational activity has been required to help new patrons acquiesce to the McDonald’s way. Fantasia (1995, p. 222), in a critique of McDonald’s entrance into France, provides the following ethnographic description of the phenomenon:
During the busier of the two periods that I observed, an assistant manager (uniforms are color coded) placed herself about four or five yards in front of the counter to serve as a “guide,” answering occasional questions from customers and directing traffic to available places at the counter. The fact that somebody was assigned this task suggests that the company anticipated some initial difficulties for those unfamiliar with the ritual process, and indeed there were occasional moments of chaos on the first day of business in this McDonald’s restaurant.

A similar story emerges from Stephenson’s (1989) ethnographic account of the Dutch, where the desired queuing behaviour is viewed as distinctly American and, as such, as behaviour somewhat problematic for the Dutch. Chua (2000) draws on these two European examples to set up a contrast with the ease with which Singaporeans took to McDonald’s, in part because their mindset is described as being “Driven single-mindedly by the desire for economic success, every aspect of life is rationalised to increase orderliness; orderliness is a ‘totalising’ strategy of government” (Chua, 2000, p. 190). Watson (2000, pp. 27-8) notes McDonald’s desire to make all nationalities behave in an ‘American’ manner in other places, such as Moscow, Beijing and Hong Kong. This observation is at the core of the dialectic, positioning McDonald’s as a representative of America, as a generator of order, and a catalyst for a type of disorder that views this as an expression of cultural imperialism.

Fantasia’s observation helps highlight, two important aspects of the McDonald’s restaurant experience. Firstly, in reference to the ‘civilising process,’ there is the symbolism of the queue as a sign of the highly rationalised form of order and acquiescence by the individual, required for the efficient operation of the McDonald’s industrialised and Fordist food system. Secondly, there is the ambiguous role of the customer as an unpaid ‘staff’ member, as a symbol of inversion in the McDonald’s experience.

The customer is no longer elevated to the socially high position of notional master of servants. The temporary and illusionary position of power that was integral to the restaurant experience is removed; the customer is forced to assume the role of waiter and symbolically lowered to the level of menial. As Shelton (1990, p. 521) observes,
this inverts the traditional restaurant social hierarchy, ordered by the aristocratic model of lord and servant. This is dispensed with to serve the economic interest of the restaurant. The symbolism of the waiter standing while the customer remains seated is replaced by the apparently more egalitarian relationship of both parties standing at the counter. This, he suggests, is indicative of a modern mass-market society.

The customer as simultaneously dutiful consumer and efficient worker in the industrial system has replaced the illusion of the customer as a temporary member of a leisured aristocracy. Not only must the McDonald’s customer conform in relationship to the incivility of dining highlighted by Finkelstein; s/he must also conform to the Taylorism of work. This act of self-service is reconstructed as an expression of an American version of modernity and an example of Ritzer’s prized efficiency. Fantasia (1995, p. 222) concedes that self-service actually helps to establish this sense of the modern: “Because fast food is perceived differently, as new, as American, as modern, it tends to be treated as a different kind of place.” The ambivalent nature of the customer as customer/waiter fuels a certain perception of freedom. One can, for example, choose where to sit in the restaurant, rather than be allocated a table. The limited menu, with the standardised food and mode of eating, contribute to the negation of the traditional restaurant opportunity to engage in status-building behaviour. Yan (1997, p. 42) points out that for those Chinese without “a lot of money,” the Beijing McDonald’s offers a safe means of entertaining without the risk of being upstaged by wealthier diners at adjoining tables. McDonald’s has overturned the established restaurant hegemony, and replaced it with an experience perceived to represent a set of values that characterise modernity, democracy and egalitarianism. The McDonald’s experience is only democratic however, in its offer of a standardised mass-market experience, and not in terms of taking notice of the individual’s desires, in the manner Brillat-Savarin (1970, pp. 267-75) conceived of as restaurant democracy. As Fantasia (1995, p. 235) notes:

While certainly accessible as a popular cultural form, the fast food outlet can only be considered ‘democratic’ by relying on a fairly narrow conception of democracy. For if democratic culture refers to cultural forms that are shaped and moulded by those
that use them, the fast food outlet is essentially no more “democratic” than the most elitist of three-star restaurants.

The requirement for customers to ‘work’, and Shelton (1990, p. 520) claim’s that the focus of McDonald’s is on the spectacle of work, are contradicted by marketing that presents a notion of time-out, a stepping-away from the profane, to a sacred leisured space. Here the construct of leisure is not the adult and aristocratic notion of the leisure encapsulated by fine dining, but rather an inversion that presents as a childish carnivalesque form of eating as everyday fun.

The distancing from the traditional restaurant by the use of elements found in the carnivalesque helps explains the ambiguous nature of McDonald’s and how the restaurant generates both success and antagonism. McDonald’s is similar enough to the traditional restaurant to be included in a restaurant typology; it is, however, differentiated by the use of carnivalesque elements to overturn and thus caricature elements of the traditional restaurant. In some respects, McDonald’s must be simultaneously understood as restaurant and ‘anti-restaurant,’ expressing what it is while mocking what it is to be a restaurant. While the McDonald’s experience is highly ordered, the experience of the McDonald’s restaurant is one that also embraces Bakhtin’s notion of folk culture. The carnivalesque realm of disorder thus brings into question the prevailing serious, official notion of the restaurant and what the restaurant represents. McDonald’s is a restaurant of the masses, where people can experience a meal that allows a regression to a simple, childlike, fun world, one that stands in direct contrast to the serious world of the adult. The transgression allows the momentary overthrowing of rules and rituals. It is this carnivalesque element of McDonald’s restaurants that serves to highlight the existing sense of order and to explain how McDonald’s has become a sign for that order. Yet simultaneously, embracing disorder empowers the McDonald’s sign to question that very order and, like Carnival to hold out promise of a different world.
The McDonald’s meal – order and disorder

To be classified as a restaurant, McDonald’s must fulfil the central function of restaurants: that is, the provision of a combination of food and drink that fits within the accepted cultural classification system of what is understood and read as a meal. Douglas’s (1975) definition illustrates how the McDonald’s meal is simultaneously ordered, fitting the system of classification, and disordered in its liminality. For Douglas, the meal is defined as a mixture of solid foods accompanied by liquids; clearly McDonald’s’ offering fits this description. Douglas’s next element is the complex series of syntactic links that control elements of them and place the meals in a set order linked to the time of day. For Douglas, the meals of the day have names and structure: breakfast comes before lunch and, within breakfast, cereal before bacon and eggs. McDonald’s take away from this ordered structure by offering only two meal periods: breakfast and the rest of the day. The breakfast foods, for example, remain structured by links to traditional Western breakfast foods, but come packaged within the frame of the McDonald’s hamburger concept. For example, the bacon and egg McMuffin is traditional bacon and eggs served in a bun. Douglas’s requirement that meals use at least one mouth-entering utensil is not met: at McDonald’s’ diners are expected to eat with their hands. While the requirement of sitting at a table is catered for, so too, is the possibility of taking the food away. Her requirement that the meal impose a restriction of movement and alternative activities is ambiguously enacted within the context of the dine-in/take-away divide, the time pressure imposed on consumption, and the distractions offered to children by the playground. We can also observe a variety of food contrasts, another of Douglas’s requirements. Visser (1991) is content to label the central feature of McDonald’s, the hamburger, to be a product of the tradition of the classic Western aristocratic meal. Here the meal is ordered according to the Western tradition, but is located at the opposite end of the spectrum to the grand meal that it emulates. The extent to which Douglas’s criteria are met by the McDonald’s offering is important; firstly, in establishing inclusion for the McDonald’s offering in the category of order that defines the meal--with this recognition comes a rich set of meanings that is encapsulated within the sign of the meal. Secondly, by noting the points of departure from the centre of the definition, a hierarchical taxonomy can be established. Meals can be ranked, judged by their
fitness as good or bad specimens of their type, or categorised using class-related criteria based upon notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’.

Dining at McDonald’s is thus ordered by the company’s construct of its restaurant experience, the Western concept of the meal, and also structured in response to wider social forces. Meanings of culture, place, history, or class all contribute to the rich semiotic meaning communicated by the meal, serving to underscore the concept expressed by Brillat-Savarin’s fourth aphorism: “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are.”

To negotiate the McDonald’s experience successfully requires the consumer to demonstrate a knowledge of and subservient complicity to the McDonald’s orchestrated sense of order and ritual. For example, food must be ordered by using pre-scripted terms, or the customer must understand his/her obligation to conduct his/her own bussing. Kottak (1978, p. 82) summarises this situation:

Participation in McDonald’s rituals involves temporary subordination of individual differences in a social and culturally collectivity. By eating at McDonald’s, not only do we communicate that we are hungry, enjoy hamburgers, and have inexpensive tastes but also that we are willing to adhere to a value system and a series of behaviours dictated by an exterior entity. In a land of tremendous ethnic, social, economic, and religious diversity, we proclaim that we share something with millions of other Americans.

By eating at McDonald’s, the individual is making a statement about his or her culture and ‘self’, with the food communicating an individual’s deeper held values. By choosing to eat at McDonald’s, the individual can be said to buy into McDonald’s stated value system or, more broadly, into the values McDonald’s has come to represent. Kincheloe (2002, p. 21) provides a vivid personal account of his attempt to purchase modernity through McDonald’s: “I didn’t want to remain a hick from the mountains. As I later named my desire: I longed to be modern. As a hillbilly I wasn’t sure of the hip ways of dressing, acting, thinking, or representing myself. In my cultural naïveté I saw McDonald’s as a place where modern cultural capital could some how be dispensed.”
The sense of belonging noted by Kottak (1978) is an expression of the civilising process’s chains of relationships, communicated by food’s ability to signify inclusion and exclusion:

McDonald’s has become one of many new and powerful elements of American culture that provide common expectations, experience, and behaviour – overriding region, class, formal religious affiliation, political sentiments, gender, age, ethnic group, sexual preference and urban, suburban, or rural residence (Kottak, 1978, p. 82).

As Bourdieu (1984) illustrated, consumption practices can make powerful value statements. The sense of inclusiveness generated by a common consumer experience has been magnified, as more traditional forms of belonging in industrial societies are replaced by participation in mass culture as the unifying moral force. Kottak (1978) ventures that the ritual associated with McDonald’s has, for some Americans, assumed a level of experience comparable to a religious ritual, the order of the church replaced by the order of commerce.

The success of McDonald’s fast-food experience has in the past often been attributed to the generation of and adherence to a highly rationalised form of order. This order enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the concept of disorder in the creation of success and construction of the character of the McDonald’s experience. The carnivalesque nature of McDonald’s allows a dialectic between order and disorder to emerge, where McDonald’s is capable of reinforcing the hegemonic structure as it inverts and questions the existing order. ‘High’ elements of the meals that generate elitism are inverted, promoting ‘low’ elements that help engineer an uncomplicated consumption experience. To enjoy mass-market appeal, food must conform to the flavour profile that offends the fewest possible people: by necessity, a focus on the bland, safe and predictable. This rationalisation, an example of Elias’s diminished contrasts, is at odds however with the push by modernity to exult the novel. The ritualistic nature of the gourmet meal, enshrined in Brillat-Savarin’s aphorisms, is minimized. Consumption is infantile, within the mastery of a child--even the time allocated to eating accommodates a short attention span. The menu offers limited
choice; it can be selected according to pictures, using carnivalesque terms. It can be eaten using fingers, negating the need to master utensils. It is not constrained by complex rules of etiquette that structure the civilising process. It may even come with a toy for amusement and distraction. McDonald’s meals invert the serious ritualistic world of traditional adult restaurant dining, and promote a childlike realm of eating as fun.

This carnivalised eating has overtones of Bakhtin’s popular and festive form of folk meal, the ‘banquet for all the world.’ Eating McDonald’s could be read as a similar feast for the entire world, a display of inclusion within a global mass/folk culture, an egalitarian meal that is essentially the same everywhere in the world. Each person stands equal, able to share in the consumption of the collective meal, a celebration of a carnivalesque culture. The abundance suggested by a McDonald’s meal becomes an aspirational feast, a celebration of the triumph of work (the values of Americanisation and McDonaldisation), the collective effort (globalisation). The McDonald’s meal is a triumph of all the forces that McDonald’s is a sign for, a celebration that this approach to life is successful—a clear sign that late capitalism, free market economics, Fordism, all have helped deliver the utopian ideal that is embodied in the concept of modernity, particularly in the guise of the American dream. A McDonald’s meal is a triumph of folk culture. It embraces the order of Bourdieu’s defiant working-class meal, challenging the construct of ‘form’ that orders bourgeois ‘high’ culture seriousness associated with food. This can be read as a very powerful statement and recognition of the illusory triumph of ‘low’ culture over ‘high’ culture.

**McDonald’s, social class and ambiguity**

As discussed above, the McDonald’s meal encompasses both highly rational structures of order and carnivalesque disorder. The meal is ambivalent, communicating a duality, capable of being read as a social expression of either ‘high’ or ‘low’. McDonald’s food can be interpreted as ‘low’, an embodiment of Bakhtin’s ‘meal for all the world.’ It displays the order of Bourdieu’s (1984) working-class meal, which was constructed in antagonistic opposition, representative of a worldview different to that of the bourgeoisie. Alternatively, the meal can be read as
an expression of the ‘high’, a signifier of the ‘civiliising process,’ and the growing dominance of American middle-class values.

The construct of order is dependent on class orientation and the adoption of a ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ approach. By using the binary of Bourdieu’s twin worldview and recognising the lack of neutrality inherent in this model, we can better understand the richness of McDonald’s ambiguity and its positioning as a sign. We get a particular sense of the political debate that surrounds the use of McDonald’s. The power of McDonald’s as a sign is due to the disorder created by the numerous transgressions of existing order categories in the McDonald’s restaurant experience, as it draws meaning from both the poles of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.

This ambiguity of McDonald’s is additional to that intrinsic to the construct of order present in all restaurants. Spang (2000, pp. 225-6) describes this inherent ambiguity of restaurants as “A forum for the confession of appearances, the restaurant dining room was a prime arena for the anxious interplay of hierarchy and democratization so characteristic of modern social life.” By their very nature, the order of the concept and category of the restaurant are marked with an ambiguous disorder that makes any reading of restaurants difficult and open to interpretation. This appeal to aspects that facilitate social differentiation and cater towards the mass market is inherently confusing and largely overlooked in the critique of restaurants. Spang (2000, p. 223) provides a rare insight into this ambiguity:

Lurking within the tidy stratigraphy of restaurants lay the uneasy suspicions that they might actually blur, rather than reinforce, social distinctions. Gastronomy’s suitability as a tool for social mapping was subverted by its own claims to autonomy: insofar as the discourse of taste insisted on its own legitimacy, it argued against the viability of using the diet as a marker of social class. The sense of taste, after all, was meant to know neither social rank nor economic limits; within a restaurant, where every customer was presented with the same menu, social distinction threatened to collapse into gastronomic equality.

The order of restaurants is charged with ambiguity and, as movement from the central concept is made more peripheral, ‘restaurants’ become infused with even
greater levels of disorder. The subcategory of restaurants, the modern ‘fast-food restaurants’, can be seen to depart from the ‘proper’ central concept of restaurant by moving away from an experience based on ‘form’. They are therefore infused with high levels of disorder. This, as Belasco (1979) outlined, is a product of the history of this genre of restaurant, and its purposeful marrying of form and function. The readings of restaurants such as McDonald’s, defined as restaurants but, by their transgressions placed at the periphery of the restaurant category, are thus highly ambiguous.

The success of the company, and its elevation as a successful operation in the business hierarchy, was based on the company overturning key elements of traditional restaurant operations. McDonald’s has inverted the concept of the restaurant as a stage for the individual to display conspicuous gastronomic consumption, thus gaining high social capital. McDonald’s food is a celebration of ‘low’ or mass culture over ‘high’ culture; the food is cheap, filling, bland and unchallenging, rather than the status-linked food of the gastronomic temple. The eating is fast, fuel-like eating, rather than the slower, purposeful, and thoughtful gastronomic consumption advocated in the appreciation of table. The demonstration of manners as a means of differentiating, a level of civilising, is overturned to favour the infantile rather than the cultured adult, the meal experience constrained by a low level of ritual rather than the ritual-laden ‘high’ cultural dining experience.

The food offering at McDonald’s resembles Bourdieu’s (1984) description of working-class meals, a positioning that allows Kincheloe (2002, p. 36) to venture the following comment:

Much of the public conversation about McDonald’s in the United States possesses a strong elitist current and a condescension that grants a measure of cultural capital to those that express it. The last thing I want to do is defend the culinary value of McDonald’s food, but many of the pronouncements concerning the aesthetics of McDonald’s are excessive.

This construction of hierarchies and the strength of associated feeling can be examined in light of Bourdieu’s description of working-class food. This ‘low’
position is in stark contrast to Yan (1997), in his examination of McDonald’s in Beijing. While in the mature market of the United States McDonald’s generates low cultural capital, in the emerging market of Beijing the Big Mac has been transformed into a form of haute cuisine. This is in part aided by McDonald’s not fitting the existing local taxonomy of public eateries, so that it could capitalise on the fad value. In a new market, the novelty associated with McDonald’s helps generate status rewards within a system that seeks to maintain levels of social differentiation. While he is conscious of the ability to generate status, Yan also notes (1997, p. 42) the ambiguous and inherent egalitarian nature of restaurants. As he explains, the limited menu of McDonald’s offers relief from the status quest that forms part of the Chinese culinary culture. In the example offered by Yan, the complexity of reading McDonald’s is accentuated and the position of the reader made primary. The food and eating rituals may comply with the notion of working-class meals but, in the manner of bricolage, this is contingent on the reader and the operating environments, both internal and external, of the restaurant.

The ambiguity generated by McDonald’s is made more complex, at least in the Australian market by the company’s action in a climate of mounting social criticism and political pressure. In 2005 it launched a new range of healthier menu options that are more aligned to the bourgeois tastes of ‘form’ identified by Bourdieu. This direct appeal to bourgeois values of self-control and moderation also finds resonance in the subject of McDonald’s and alcohol.

A key area of differentiation between McDonald’s and a substantive proportion of Western restaurants is the sale of alcoholic drinks. Symbolically, alcohol, and particularly wine, has been read as an ambiguous sign, representative of order or disorder. As order, alcohol, particularly wine, is an integral part of the ‘high’ cultural dining experience, offering a recognised means of demonstrating social capital through means of knowledge and exhibited taste. McDonald’s, and historically the American fast-food industry, has by and large not offered any alcohol as part of its package of the meal experience. There are, globally, exceptions to this rule; in Germany, for example, beer has been served (Love, 1986, pp. 436-7).
The decision not to serve alcohol is part of a conscious strategy to appeal to the family market, predicated on maintaining a particular middle-class sense of order and control, based upon notions of moderation and self-control. By excluding alcohol from the menu, McDonald’s has removed the disorderly potential of immoderate behaviour by its patrons, behaviour that was an anxiety of Brillat-Savarin’s. This shifted the responsibility for self-control and moderation from the individual to central control. This centralisation of control by McDonald’s is a demonstration of the civilising process in action, and the power of monopolies to enforce their rule. This loss of personal freedom and subservience to order has also proved popular: Love (1986, pp. 436-7) and Yan (1997, p. 57) both comment on the removal of an undesirable element that can be experienced in some other eating establishments.

The lack of alcohol also provides a point of differentiation between McDonald’s and the more traditional concept of the restaurant. As a ritual device, alcohol has traditionally been used to mark a transition between the serious world of work and the opposing fun time of leisure. This has been a central concept to the stepping-away from the everyday that is inherent and necessary to the traditional restaurant experience, but one that is neutralised at McDonald’s, reinforcing the ambivalent position of the customer as unpaid worker. The requirement to work fuels in turn ambiguity, by contrasting an already ambiguous leisure experience. The adult leisure associated with the traditional form of restaurant has been inverted, with McDonald’s instead promoting an eating experience of childlike fun. To reinforce the notion of fun, McDonald’s has chosen to draw upon the ‘low’ carnivalesque to communicate the desired message. The provision of playlands, meals with toys, and the use of Ronald McDonald, the corporate clown, fuel the perception that McDonald’s is a playful transgression of the classic restaurant experience.

This message of fun eating, while aimed at appealing to children, communicates a paradoxical class message that illustrates the rich and ambiguous message of McDonald’s. Bakhtin contends that the carnivalesque resonates with the values of folk culture. Elias suggests that to maintain social stratification the bourgeoisie must distance itself from the values and representations of the proletariat. The middle class must seek social differentiation by distancing itself and by closing the door on working class-markers and seeking out markers, of the higher social order. But the
carnivalesque maintains a strong fascination for the middle class even as it actively seeks to distance itself from it. At McDonald’s, tension is created for the middle class by the company’s use of the carnivalesque. There is a coexisting attraction and repulsion, an example of competing narratives. The carnivalesque represents a lower class material, an immediate sign of bodily pleasure--concepts that the middle class, with their aspirational drive, must reject, while still fascinated at some level. This charges McDonald’s with a powerful symbolic quality.

**Conclusion**

McDonald’s, as the ethnography illustrated, has become part of the everyday, a familiar place to dine, a recognisable part of the landscape of our ‘hot’ society, and a sign of the order of late twentieth-century modernity. As a restaurant experience, it is easy to observe the construct that Finkelstein (1989) outlined: a particular form of highly rationalised order used to structure a desired dining experience, for profit. But on closer observation, accompanying the notions of order are elements of disorder that are set to challenge the concept of McDonald’s as a sign of highly rationalised order.

The history of the American fast-food restaurant and McDonald’s in particular, as portrayed by Belasco (1979) and Love (1986), offers an important insight into an intersection of the two versions of history represented by the competing narratives of Elias (1994) and Bakhtin (1984). As a restaurant experience, McDonald’s is differentiated from the traditional order of restaurants, by offering a purposeful combination of elements that embraced ‘form’ and ‘function’. This duality stands in contrast to the argument advanced by Bourdieu (1984), which comprehended these food values in antagonistic terms. The result is that McDonald’s communicates an ambiguous message, expressing the duality of order and the dialectic between order and disorder. Open to interpretation from either a ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ perspective. McDonald’s presents as either a particular category of restaurant, or as an ‘anti-restaurant’ that presents a disordered challenge to the hegemonic structure of restaurants. In both scenarios McDonald’s occupies a liminal position.
The hegemonic order that structured the restaurant experience is reflected in the construct of the meal. Ordered in the tradition of the grand European meal, McDonald’s food—like all food—is capable of communicating, in the spirit of Brillat-Savarin’s fourth aphorism, a projection of the self. Consumption of McDonald’s is most commonly read as an expression of agreement or subservience to the form of order and values that McDonald’s purposely projects or has been assigned. This interpretation can take both a positive or negative position according to the class construct of the reader and the market of the McDonald’s operation in question. However, when read through the constructs of Bakhtin and Bourdieu, McDonald’s can be interpreted as a celebration of folk culture.

At one level, McDonald’s represents the rise and dominance of middle-class order, an expression of the civilising process—yet on closer examination McDonald’s embrace of the carnivalesque is emblematic for the inherent disorder that is McDonald’s. A combination of form and function, order and disorder, McDonald’s is ambiguous; it is a restaurant that embraces a duality; it is the product of the dialectic of order and disorder that simultaneously represents and questions the hegemonic structure.
Chapter 7--McDonald’s – The image factory

Introduction

As highlighted above, McDonald’s is one of the most powerful food images of the twentieth-century. From the earliest days of the McDonald’s corporation, emphasis has been on the image projected, as an important part of the overall McDonald’s experience. But McDonald’s as a sign has come to represent more than a carefully managed brand image; it has become a complex sign, an open text capable of multiple and ambiguous readings. It is in the corporation’s employment of the carnivalesque to create the ‘showbiz’ spectacle as an integral part of the McDonald’s experience that the ambiguous strength of and attraction to the image is generated. McDonald’s, Ritzer’s symbol of the rationalisation of order, is represented by its corporate spokesperson, the clown Ronald McDonald. The sign of order is signified by a carnivalesque image of disorder, a clear expression of the dialectic of order and disorder.

McDonald’s selling imagery

The documented history of the McDonald’s corporation (Boas and Chain, 1976; Love, 1986) provides witness to the intensity of the sustained effort, that has been expended to build and maintain its desired corporate image. This is an image focused upon the public face of the company, rather than the corporate reality. The company has provided an early and clear recognition that it understood that its product was not just hamburgers, but also the sale of the whole experience of consuming McDonald’s. It is this recognition – that is, the product was the image--that has increasingly driven the marketing focus. This point is critical in understanding McDonald’s as a political power, and the corporation’s focus on trying to influence social order to fulfil its business objectives and customer’s desires. From humble beginnings that relied on individual franchisees to do their own advertising and marketing, to massive and centrally coordinated global campaigns, McDonald’s has promoted image over product. “Ray always told us that anyone could make a hamburger and that we had to do more,” recalls Schrage, now a senior executive vice
president of McDonald’s. “So when it came to national advertising, we felt we had to add something to our message that was different. We wanted to position ourselves with an extra dimension – a charm or warmth that no one else had” (Love, 1986, p. 305). This selling of image, by investing McDonald’s as a sign demonstrates the commercial employment of Barthes’ (1973, 1979 and 1982) concept of food as signifier. McDonald’s has, through its marketing, sought to build not just brand awareness and loyalty but, importantly, the corporate and product image. It has deliberately sought to invest the McDonald’s image with a desired set of values drawn from other traditional bourgeois signs, such as flag, family and cleanliness, building a manipulated paleo-symbol, an image that taps into the concept that order must be coherent. This manufacturing of meaning as order, seen to tap into the desire of the age, has been a key to the success of McDonald’s.

This manufactured meaning used to build the desired image is clearly evident in the image-building documented by Love (1986, pp. 425-6) in relation to McDonald’s entry into the Japanese market. The task was to introduce an American concept into an anti-American Japan, by projecting McDonald’s as a local Japanese company. Rather than localising the menu to suit Japanese tastes, the American menu was offered in terms that sought to tap into Japanese desire. The Japanese CEO, Dan Fujita, uses outlandish statements to make his point: “The reason the Japanese people are so short and have yellow skin is because they have eaten nothing but fish and rice for two thousand years.” “If we eat McDonald’s hamburgers and potatoes for a thousand years, we will become taller, our skin will become white, and our hair blonde” (Love, 1986, p. 426).

In another example of McDonald’s attempt to manipulate its image, the corporate articulation that it is in ‘show business’ is used to propagate the corporate mythology. The statement becomes a means of social differentiation, projecting a ‘favourable’ image of McDonald’s as an innovative company. This ignores the historical construct of restaurants as differentiated food retailers. All restaurants, from the very early restaurants that Brillat-Savarin found so alluring, to those of Finkelstein’s typology, have sold image as part of a dining experience. Restaurants, by their very definition, are businesses that not only sell food but also rely on the sale of the experience, a trade that involves symbolic exchange.
Finkelstein (1989) provides a useful interpretation of this phenomenon, of how restaurants facilitate the turning of a biological necessity into a display of conspicuous consumption, by catering to private desires while servicing their own commercial wants. Using the show business analogy, restaurants are social institutions constructed as a stage, “A Diorama of Desire,” to facilitate the fulfilment of the bourgeois desires outlined by Bourdieu (1984) and Elias (1994). These desires are structured and controlled by the hegemony that maintains control by a process of rationalisation, here, in the mode of McDonaldisation, generating order that is seen to reward individuals with social capital when they accumulate signifiers in the form of particular goods, services or experiences. Importantly, this consumption consolidates the status quo of the hegemony. As Ritzer (2003a) noted, the appeal of this form of consumption is that it provides a relatively appealing, safe and predictable means of living; it allows an easily understood sense of order and social construct that is paid for by self-control and subservience. The boredom generated by this mode of living is alleviated by use of ambiguous social institutions, like the restaurants that reference symbols of disorder to facilitate a ritual stepping-away from the constraints of order, holding out the illusionary promise that they can temporarily fulfil desires outside order. This ability of restaurants to fulfil desire temporarily can be viewed in the example of a fine dining restaurant’s appeal to status, by use of the aristocratic model of master and servant to structure service delivery.

The restaurant is relying on food as part of its experience, to be able to communicate a desired message: the commercial application of the sentiment of Brillat-Savarin’s fourth aphorism. Drawing upon Douglas (1972 & 1975, pp. 249-75), the tasks shifts from merely ‘deciphering the meal’ to deciphering the restaurant’s whole meal experience. What is it that is consumed? What is communicated? How is it interpreted? Ritzer (1998, p. 130) poses these questions in relationship to McDonald’s, stating that “When we eat a Big-Mac we may think that we are consuming a glorified hamburger, but in fact we are eating an object-sign. In eating that object-sign and not others we are expressing much about our position within the system.” But as Rabelais demonstrated, food has a duality, capable of being read as an open text, both the producer and the consumer of the sign working separately as
bricoleurs to create meaning. When we eat McDonald’s, whose imagery have we consumed and what image was projected?

Imagery is an important driving mechanism in the ‘civilising process’. The ordering property of food extends to the projection of self-image, driving social differential and social change in turn. Consumption patterns mark the individual, with eating providing an identity that is shaped by the hegemony. Controlling the imagery has become, Ritzer (1998, p. 129) contends, a political tool of the hegemony: “the new means of consumption are busy fabricating and manufacturing signs and it is those signs that are controlling our behaviour.” This ordering, Kincheloe (2002, p. 73) adds, has intensified as, “In the postmodern context, individuals are rendered more vulnerable than ever to the power of the image.” The order of modernity is replaced by the order of postmodernity, where order has increasingly exploited the power of the sign as a form of control.

McDonald’s – food as entertainment and spectacle

Restaurants have shifted and recreated the normally ‘private’ activity of eating as a display, a ‘public’ spectacle. This generates an ambiguous use of the space between private and public. This change in space use is an important indicator of just how previous categories are broken down, an example of how Mennell’s (1985) diminishing contrasts occur and how control is increasingly rationalised. Restaurant dining becomes a public display of bourgeois sensibilities, mastery of self-control and the ‘civilising process’—where decorum dictates that one observes one’s fellow diner as spectacle, in the mode of Brillat-Savarin, rather than engage in the collective solidarity that Bourdieu (1979, p. 183) observes structures behaviour in working-class cafes. These behaviours are determined not only by the constraints Elias (1994) outlined, but also by the commercial imperatives explained by Finkelstein (1989).

Ritzer’s (2003a) description of living in a McDonaldised society, in the *Islands of the Living Dead*, provides an indication of how spectacle has been used by the hegemony as a form of control. The concept of ‘bread and circuses’ has been brought to play, rewarding the populace’s submissiveness with a level of economic prosperity and a series of diverting entertainments that purposefully distract from an
engagement with an examined existence, thus allowing the hegemony to strengthen its control. The previous separation of sacred and profane is presented as merged. The Lenten Carnival division of living, is replaced, Ritzer argues (2003a, p. 124), by life, offered as a non-stop carnival. However, this is not the carnival of Bakhtin, which stood in defiant opposition to official order, but rather a rationalised and sanitised form that employs carnivalesque imagery to create a distracting spectacle.

The engagement in the alternative, unofficial world shaped by the culture of folk humour portrayed by Bakhtin is substituted by one described by Ritzer (1998, p. 124) as simulated ‘fun’ and ‘excitement’. Yet, this feeling is induced by reinforcements such as advertising; for example, McDonald’s is advertised in terms of stepping away to a fun place, the home of the Clown Ronald McDonald, to play in McDonald’s playland or finding the toy in the McHappy meal. This portrayal masks the purposefully prosaic nature of the experience that characterises this construct of order. Eating at McDonald’s is not just eating the standardised burgers, but marketed as partaking in an ‘exciting and fun’ McDonald’s experience.

The spectacle is presented not only as ‘fun’, but is also used to reinforce the values of the socially dominant. As Shelton (1990, p. 520) noted, the “spectacle of McDonald’s is work”--the in-store imagery is a projection of the values McDonald’s has sought to incorporate into its sign. At McDonald’s, the spectacle becomes a celebration of the elements of McDonaldisation and values such as the Fordist manufacturing process, technology, the industrial, free-market economics and importantly, Brand ‘America’. The spectacle reads as a morality tale, offering the illusion of a utopia, confirmation that the hegemony has delivered, that the subservience to order has been rewarded, yielding a personal advantage.

Ritzer recognises the appeal offered by this life of spectacle, but also that the structure generates disorder. Kincheloe (2002, pp. 88-92) becomes an example of this disorder when he condemns this life of spectacle, of life he views as lived as an exclamation, without reflection or resort to the philosopher’s tradition of reason and analysis. The symbolic engagement with life and death that Bakhtin saw in food is, for Kincheloe, replaced by a disconnection, summarised in the McDonald’s promotion “McDonald’s does it all for you.” Eating becomes spectacle, divorced
from the gastronomic notion of thinking about the whole complex process of paddock to plate. The engagement with real life is surrendered, relinquished to the corporation.

For Kincheloe (2002), as for many of the other critics he cites, the discontent is not solely focused upon McDonald’s, but upon McDonald’s as a sign of American culture. Just as Rabelais used Chitterlings and sausage imagery to question his society, so Kincheloe has used the imagery of the Big Mac to question the values of his society, and the control exerted by the hegemony. His rage is directed at social control, as he contends that American corporations are too focused on providing entertainment and trading in what Pine and Gilmore (1999) labelled the “Experience Economy,” producing distractions that prevent people from engaging with the underlying problems of society. Kroc’s concept of McDonald’s as show business is a sign of the wider phenomena of ‘spectacle Americana’, of a society that increasingly does not question or reflect but is governed using the principles of ‘bread and circuses’

**The hamburger as sign**

The star of Kroc’s show is the hamburger, itself a complex sign. A meal, in the context of Douglas (1975), the hamburger can be read as a New World representation of what Visser (1991, p. 208) contends is an image encapsulating the order expressed in the traditional tripartite Western meal of meat and three vegetables, with the separate layers of food still clearly identifiable and providing a sophisticated reference to elements of the sequential model of the formal meal.

The hamburger has become such a powerful signifier of the meal that on the standardised international sign that indicates that eating is prohibited the image of a hamburger is now used to symbolise all food. This use, in turn, is a signifier of the order that dominates global social capital, the tastes of the American middle class. The hamburger as a meal represents the rise and values of the bourgeois self, the individual, self-contained; it stands against the image of Bourdieu’s working-class convivial collective, expressed symbolically by a one pot meal. Simultaneously, the McDonald’s hamburger, because of its global ubiquitousness, is now the most
convivial of meals, a Bakhtinian ‘banquet for the all the world’, allowing the masses to come together and consume a common meal.

The McDonald’s hamburger is also ordered by the spectacle of McDonaldised work, structured according to industrial principles rather than crafted by artisan labour, a descendent of the ideals expressed by the Italian Futurist Marinetti (1989). Like Futurist cooking, McDonald’s can be read as offering a manifesto for cultural change, particularly in new foreign markets, as a culinary challenge to the social torpor. Reflecting elements of Marinetti’s culinary philosophy, McDonald’s hamburgers are described by Boym (2001, p. 7) with the colourful visual imagery of technology:

The entire fast-food meal is composed of separate, modular, interchangeable elements. The inner structure of the burger itself can be easily separated into further components, all open for inspection. The assembly of each hamburger has a clearly mechanical nature. Even the look of the different parts alludes to various technological processes, rather than having the conventional appearance of cooked food. Thus the beef patty is produced by moulding to a great degree of precision, just like plastic parts (the diameter of a McDonald’s burger is exactly 3.875 inches). Like aluminium extrusions, fries are shaped in precise square sections that have nothing to do with the potato. American cheese, itself a perfectly square yellow tile, is moulded around the burger in a process that approximates thermo-forming. Only the bun still maintains some resemblance to conventional bread, but even there, the precise slicing creates two mating parts similar to the male and female parts of mould. Individually added servings of ketchup play the role of oil and grease necessary for the working of any mechanical assembly.

This hamburger homage to the industrial can also generate, through the binary construct of order, a corresponding inverse reading. The focus on technology promotes a reading of the sign as anti nature. The binary is interpreted through the duality of order in accordance to the reader’s preferred values. This position is clearly viewed in the eco-friendly rhetoric used in the anti-environmental accusations levelled against McDonald’s, which have formed a regular component of the corporation’s protestors claims. This ability to generate ambiguity, because of the
duality of order, is repeated in the interpretation of the McDonald’s hamburger as a symbol of America.

The hamburger is read simultaneously as either the best or worst of what it is to be American. On one hand, it is used in a positive sense to represent America’s self-assessed strengths or as a symbol of the utopian dream that is America. Rozin (1994, pp. 184-5) uses the image in this vein, expressing the idea that the hamburger is the direct result of the values of American society: the Protestant work ethic, the love of technology, the relationship to the perception of time, the melting pot of races that have contributed to the formation of America, or the description of the agricultural richness of America in comparison to Europe. He evokes fertile prairies on which to grow wheat, grasslands on which to raise beef and subtropical islands on which to grow sugar cane as well as a recognition of the New World contribution to the hamburger meal: tomatoes for ketchup and potatoes for the french fries.

The bringing of individuals together in a melting pot of society and elevation of the notion of individualism are values that both Rozin (1994) and Sardar and Davies (2002) view as characteristic of America. The hamburger is a metaphor for explaining the inclusion of disparate components into a cohesive whole. Recognising that America itself is not a single identity, Sardar and Davies (2002, pp. 8-9) make the argument that ‘America’ is however recognisable, and experienced as a coherent force. Using the metaphor of ‘the hamburger syndrome’, they seek to draw a similarity between how the hamburger is experienced and how America is experienced globally, through many diverse channels. “A hamburger comes as a package: it is a meal in itself; it is produced, sold and eaten in a particular way; the entire system is an integral part of the hamburger experience. It is not possible to take the pickle, tomato or lettuce out of the hamburger, but you bought them all together, you paid for them, were given all of them and have to do something about them, whether you want them or not” (Sardar and Davies, 2002, p. 9). Rozin (1994, p. 191) clearly takes pride in this concept of cultural aggregation, summarises it. The hamburger “remains the most successful expression yet of the so-called melting pot, a genuine coming together of many of the world’s traditions into something new and innovative, but shorn of ethnic or cultural specificity, a rendering in food of everything America has chosen to be.” Rozin (1994) notes however that this success
has come at a substantial price. It is these costs that lead to the opposite reading of the hamburger as a sign for all that is perceived as wrong with America, and the values that order its hegemony.

**McDonald’s as an image of its own time**

McDonald’s, as an image of its own epoch, is an expression of the dialectic between order and disorder, set on the trajectory of a ‘hot’ society. The development of McDonald’s as a social institution highlights the inherent process of change that the dialectic generates. Using the coherent and consistent properties of the construct of order, McDonald’s, as a sign of the everyday, can be read from within a structuralist perspective just as any other surface representation of culture, structured in a way that reflects the order of society at any given time and the order of the deeper structures such as the force of the civilising process or, ultimately the primary binary. Here, some of the inherent ambiguity of the dialectic can be seen in the conflict between the stability of deep structures, contrasted with the constant movement in the everyday.

The genesis of restaurants was a product of changes in the social environment that straddled the French Revolution (Finkelstein, 1989; Spang, 2000). Elias (1994), charting this social change, demonstrates the shift in hegemony, with the removal of the monopoly of the aristocracy and the corresponding rise of the bourgeoisie. This shift in power dictates changes in the value system that progressively order the social hierarchies. The restaurant as a social institution succeeded, because it delivered for the bourgeois individual. This includes the consumer and those commercially interested parties, such as the restaurateur, and, as the history of gastronomy demonstrated, the cultural industry that grew out of interpreting restaurants for the public--food writers for example. Restaurant dining provided a means for personal advancement on either or both cultural and economic capital hierarchies. The restaurant as an institution should be read as a sign of order interrelated with this rise and as a consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie.

The trajectory set by the rise of the middle class in Europe is continued in America. Here the social environment that Belasco (1979) outlined in the history of the fast
food industry produced the genre of fast-food chain restaurants, because these successfully catered to changes in the American social environment. McDonald’s, as the most successful example of the genre, has become invested as a signifier for this particular manifestation of order, fast-food, the values of a middle-class America and America as a country predominantly shaped by middle-class values.

McDonald’s is a product of specific social conditions, and came to be a signifier for this particular formation of the order that governs the spectacle of the restaurant experience, outlined by Finkelstein (1989), and the increasing rationalisation of society, seen here through the work of Elias (1994). Ritzer (1993) labelled the replication of this blend of order in other social settings after the company that personifies the highly rationalised restaurant experience: McDonald’s. In accordance with Ritzer’s initial focus on the control of production of goods and services, McDonald’s as this sign, is read as American modernity, a sign of free enterprise capitalism, rationalisation, homogenisation, standardisation and mass marketing, the form of order producing ‘diminished contrasts and increased varieties.’

Its increasingly monopolistic position in the marketplace has allowed McDonald’s to move from a sign that represents order, to the manufacturer of the sign. This movement is the central thesis of Kincheloe (2002), who explains this change as evidence of McDonald’s progress from the sign of modernity, into McDonald’s as an emerging postmodern phenomenon. The focus on image creation, the manipulation of information to further corporate mythology, the inherent shallowness of the company, and the culture of spectacle with which McDonald’s engages—all used to substantiate McDonald’s as a symbol of a postmodern age.

Kincheloe’s (2002) observation is useful because it serves to place McDonald’s at a key moment in history, the interface between the order of modernity and the ‘disorder’ of postmodernity. The elements of order that position McDonald’s as a sign of modernity remain as structuring elements of the operation, generating imagery of McDonald’s that is at odds with positioning as a postmodern phenomenon. This ambiguity projects McDonald’s as a sign of order, of tradition and of disorder, the novel of postmodernity. The market implications for this liminal position are evident in McDonald’s attempts to reposition itself. It has attempted to
move away from the traditional fast-food formula that catered to the emerging middle class. This food offering had historically sought to combine the antagonistic and therefore ambiguous class concepts of ‘form’ and ‘function’. McDonald’s has attempted to reposition itself to move towards an offering that is understood as a more self-confident middle class, which increasingly requires signs that express the value of ‘form’.

This market strategy creates the situation that Elias (1994) predicted: where there is a conflict between the uses of the hegemonic position of power to create the desired order in a top-down approach, and the modification of that order created by bottom-up forces. This conflict can be read as both an expression of the times and as a manifestation of the functioning of the order/disorder dialectic. The creation of order is increasingly played out in semiotics, using paleo-symbols to create controlled meaning. It is a reflection of the growing influence of a postmodern construct of order on the everyday. This creates a fluidity of meaning as order is manipulated, generating a ‘hyperreality’ that is unstable and thus alienating. As the construct of a ‘hot’ society dictates, this alienation will generate social institutions that seek stability in alternate constructs of order—disorder—by issuing challenges to the pace of change and advancing a differentiated ordering. The instability of this ‘hyperreality’ also exacerbates the culture of spectacle by elevating the concept of novelty, and thus causing a reduction in the threshold to boredom.

This use of semiotics to create order is discussed by Ritzer (2003a). He identifies use of carnivalesque imagery by the owners of McDonaldisation, to control and create the spectacle of living as ‘fun’ within the context of McDonaldised societies. He calls these “Islands of the Living Dead.”

**McDonald’s – their use of carnivalesque**

Reading McDonald’s as a sign of Carnival may be problematic from a rationalist perspective, if we are constrained by Ritzer’s (1993) focus on McDonald’s as a sign of order. However, it is only in the embrace of disorder that McDonald’s initially differentiated its operation, tapping the potential of disorder by employing elements of the carnivalesque as part of its restaurant spectacle. This can be traced back to the
genesis of the genre and to the McDonald brothers, driven by economic imperatives, who desired to differentiate their offering from more traditional restaurant forms. No cutlery was offered for example, broadening the customer base by encouraging families and recognising the importance of children as potential customers. This unconsciously led to the embrace of the carnivalesque as an integral element of the McDonald’s spectacle.

To service a mass market, the McDonald’s experience must fulfil a desire that taps the spirit of Bakhtin’s folk culture and caters to an antagonistic set of bourgeois values–an expression of embourgeoisement. This positioning conveys the duality of order, the maintained fascination with signs of the ‘low’ while it seeks to demonstrate a distancing, by embracing the values constructed as ‘high’. The uses of ‘low’ Carnival elements abound at McDonald’s and are also frequently used in the critique of the corporation; for example, the restaurant experience draws heavily on the concept of inversion, the advertising of McDonald’s as ritual time-out-of-time, McDonald's use of its own carnivalesque ‘McLanguage’ or food described or presented in terms of excess. Berger (1978, p. 446) even described the iconic golden arches in terms of the lower body stratum; he saw them as breasts. There is also the corporate spokesperson, the clown Ronald McDonald. These symbolic elements are used to distract from the operation’s use of increased rationalisation, by projecting an image of folk freedoms, “in the service of the corporate spectacle, being an inducted messenger of its ideology” (Boje and Cai, 2004, p. 16). This use of the carnivalesque is an example of the construct of ‘circuses’ as a form of social control, but it is not without risk.

Carnival symbols are rich symbols of disorder with a long tradition of communicating their own meaning, capable of challenging the hegemony even in a sanitised form. The carnivalesque may assist the owners of McDonaldisation to create a spectacle of stipulated ‘fun’ and ‘excitement’, but within the elements the threat of disorder remains, the signs of the carnivalesque are equally available to the activist to parody and debase McDonald’s in a bottom-up attack on the hegemony.
McDonald’s as sign for a utopian dream

Ritzer’s McDonaldised ‘Islands’ are presented as places of non-stop Carnival, a utopian world of ‘fun’ and ‘excitement’. This imagery draws upon the traditional descriptions of the Land of Cockaigne, a mythical state offering an escape from the harsh realities of everyday life. Structured by class concerns, the Land of Cockaigne uses the same festive traditions as Carnival to offer a poor man’s paradise, a place of freedom, an inversion of the veracity of the everyday. Abundant food and an absence of associated labour feature prominently in the wishes and dreams of the hungry poor. This utopia, draws heavily on food imagery to create its fantasy: “Once reached, there may be found rivers of milk, wine, and honey flowing through a landscape of foodstuffs, all in enormous quantities freely available without effort; fowl already cooked fly into open mouths; pigs and chickens beg with knife and fork to be eaten; wildlife compete to be served at the next meal” (Rammel, 1990, p. 31).

Concepts of utopia have long been a recurring theme in European folklore and folk literature, used as a means of presenting an alternative construct of order and calling the hegemony into question, as part of an examined existence. Rabelais drew on the writing of Thomas More’s Utopia (1516) for inspiration and as a setting for some of his works (Screech, 1979, p. 39). For example, the Abbey of Thélème (Rabelais, Book 1, Chapters 52-57) with its motto “Do what you will,” is presented as a form of Utopia, an anti-monastery, freed from the usual strict rule. Rabelais positions Thélème as a challenge to the dominant paradigm.

Today, to dream of a land of milk and honey the world’s poor do not look to the Land of Cockaigne for Utopia, but to America. Brand ‘America’ as the sign of the dominant global power, is sold as modernity and has become for many the signifier of the land of promise. Throughout the company’s history, McDonald’s has purposefully sought to draw on the signifiers of this brand ‘America’ to achieve their own ends, creating a symbol that intertwines the desired values of McDonald’s with that of America. The resulting symbol, when linked to McDonald’s global corporate success has made McDonald’s a signifier of and for the success of the American dream, a modern-day Utopia.
The utopian element of plenty finds resonance in McDonald’s as the food symbol of brand ‘America’. It would seem symbolically inevitable that McDonald’s became a signifier of a modern-day Utopia, particularly when it is understood as a sign of disorder. For the price of a hamburger, anybody can ‘eat themselves a better world’, temporarily revelling in modernity and the American dream. This notion engages Bakhtin’s (1984, pp. 282-3) banquet imagery; eating McDonald’s symbolically represents the triumph of the individual over the modern world. Read as a modern-day folk dream, McDonald’s is promoted in utopian language, as a special place, a time-out-of-time, a place of egalitarian freedom, with no class bias, free from the oppressed labour of meal production. The meal is democratic, combining form and function; it is difficult to create social differentiation from the relatively cheap and limited McDonald’s menu. The food described in the language of excess stands in opposition to the traditional food realities of moderation and scarcity. McDonald’s offers a universal meal, metaphorically shared globally with all other McDonald’s consumers. This meal is Bakhtin’s meal for the entire world, an expression of solidarity and triumph for mass culture. It is playful, non-serious, predictable food, food from an uncomplicated world of untroubled and childlike fun. This signifying of the McDonald’s experience as utopian is reinforced by corporate advertising cartoons featuring McDonaldland, a storybook land of fictitious characters who support Ronald McDonald in the promotion of McDonald’s and its cultural value system. Even the critical Kincheloe (2002, p. 141) describes McDonaldland “as a free enterprise utopia, McDonaldland erases all differences, all conflicts; social inequities are overcome through acts of consumption.”

McDonald’s as Utopia speaks in preference of the masses. Their dream is answered: McDonald’s food offers an immediate pleasure of the body, thus fulfilling the class construct of folk culture. But like Bakhtin’s (1984, p. 302) popular banquet images, McDonald’s as Utopia is also not fully understood; it is also interpreted in a negative vein, viewed as a form of simple ‘vulgar realism’ by those who are constrained by the sense of order of a higher social stratum. This ambiguous reading is in turn compounded by the juxtaposition of McDonald’s as a sign of American free enterprise that displays values more commonly aligned with those of a socialist state. It has strict centralised control which is anti individual, an anti-intellectual culture, and a corporate ethos that has sought to curb free speech.
This creation of ambiguity by McDonald’s as a utopian symbol accords with the traditions of Utopia. Constructed as an inversion of the everyday, an expression of the dialectic of order/disorder, Utopia, when read as an open text, highlights the duality of order. Utopia, similarly McDonald’s, is both a bottom up challenge to the hegemony that offers a promise of hope, as it is also a catalyst for disillusionment, by reinforcing the structures and experience of hegemonic reality.

**The use of humour by McDonald’s**

The alignment of McDonald’s with Carnival, created through identification with Utopian imagery, is strengthened by the employment of humour and laughter in corporate service. Humour is employed to distract from the boredom produced by the rationalisation of order, creating an image that recaptures Bakhtin’s (1984) marketplace notion of Carnival as a legitimised site of democratised entertainment. This is achieved by projecting McDonald’s as a place of fun and laughter--particularly for child consumers--a restaurant experience that stands in defiance of the seriousness of traditional restaurants. This strategy of combining seriousness, operational order and carnival seeks to harness the power of order and disorder, reinstating the importance of folk culture.

By using humour however, McDonald’s trips into the problem that Bakhtin (1984) identifies in the writing of Rabelais. Rabelais draws upon a pre-Renaissance form of laughter, one that has a deep philosophical meaning, and allows a profound and particular view of the world that intertwines order and disorder. Against this is a post-Renaissance view of laughter that diminishes its role, by maintaining that what is serious cannot or must not be viewed as comical. The place of laughter is relegated to the realm of the ‘low’, assigning the same low status to those who seek to use humour. When McDonald’s’ use of humour is viewed through a bourgeois construct of order, it communicates--like Rabelais’--an image of the corporation that must be linked to the symbolically ‘low’. While potentially damaging to the corporate image, the ‘low’ is linked to mass culture, and the use of humour has become a vital and appealing ingredient of the McDonald’s experience.
Boje, Driver and Cai (2004) speculate that McDonald’s use of humour is commonly interpreted from a rationalist standpoint, as one of two, or a combination of both, of the following reasons: firstly, as a marketing ploy to attract children; and/or secondly, as a benign cover for the negative aspects of the corporation’s operations. Both strategies are interpreted as aimed at constructing a desired form of order. Love (1986) provides a history of this deliberate corporate attempt to use humour in appealing to children. For example, the 1960’s sponsorship of the children’s television show Bozo’s Circus in Washington (Love, 1986, pp. 220-1) ultimately led to the creation of the clown Ronald McDonald, and to the installation of children’s playlands in many McDonald’s stores. The second use identified the belief that humour, for example the use of Ronald McDonald as corporate spokesperson, is being used as a form of innocuous mask, to hide the harsh reality of the corporation. This particular notion was famously used to satirize McDonald’s by a protesting group of social activists on a pamphlet that lead to the McLibel trial; the cartoon featured the smiling face of Ronald McDonald, a mask for the face of corporate greed.

The use of humour by business to attract customers itself draws upon a long history explained by Bakhtin (1984). The marketplace has a tradition as a legitimate venue for the engagement of a folk life that could stand in opposition to the more serious official world. McDonald’s is very much of the marketplace, a folk venue, a restaurant for the masses that stands in many ways as a parody of the serious gastronomic restaurant.

But as Boje, Driver and Cai (2004) hypothesise, to view humour only as part of a rational strategy by McDonald’s is to miss the underlying dynamic. The use of humour, they speculate, is far more complex, more carnivalesque. Boje, Driver and Cai (2004) have recognised in humour a duality, used not only as a top-down rationalisation to build market share, but also in its pre-Renaissance form, which articulates an ongoing and grotesque engagement with the world in a cycle of degradation, transformation and regeneration.

Here Boje, Driver and Cai (2004) advance the hypothesis that McDonald’s has tapped, consciously or unconsciously, into a Bakhtinian dynamic; this exploits its
own degeneration and uses it to obtain rebirth and strategic revitalisation. The binary
construct of opposing positions, as used by protestors, often uses humour to debase
McDonald’s, and would be better understood as part of a complementary creative
cycle. While Boje, Driver and Cai (2004) use nuanced examples from McDonaldland
to illustrate their thesis, we find expression of their ideas in major articulated
repositioning by the McDonald’s corporation. For example, attacks on McDonald’s
packaging as a sign of the company as eco-vandals has seen this degradation
transformed into a corporate environmental strategy, one that has embraced new
forms of packaging and seeks to build the image of McDonald’s not as eco-vandal
but as eco-warrior. This corporate mythologising is simply another episode in a
grand narrative for the company that is focused upon the construction of positive
imagery.

Boje, Driver and Cai’s (2004) insight is important because it provides
acknowledgment of McDonald’s use of humour in a Bakhtinian construct, a practical
recognition of the order/disorder dialectic energising a ‘hot’ society, as the disorder
expressed in a bottom-up attack on the hegemony is annihilated by incorporation into
order, thus generating change. Their example recognises that a bottom-up challenge
to order through the use of humour as a moral commentary, nourishes the tradition
left by Rabelais.

The combination of food and fun in the McDonald’s experience, to create the desired
spectacle, draws upon the long tradition of Carnival as a means of escape from the
tedium of order and as a symbolic upwards challenge to the hegemony. The
regenerative cycle of humour that Boje, Driver and Cai (2004) locate in McDonald’s
is also part of the carnival tradition of the order and disorder dialectic. The use of
humour is consistent with carnival order, as it uses food and laughter as a reminder
symbolic of the material nature of current life and holds out a utopian promise for the
future; both food and laughter express an engagement with the world. Combining
food and humour in the restaurant may serve the corporation’s interests, but the
merging of the symbolic imagery of food and humour produces a powerful sign,
well-suited for use in the questioning of society. McDonald’s, as Boje, Driver and
Cai (2004) suggest, may be able to tap into this dynamic in a manner that regenerates
the corporation but simultaneously it has created a sign, with a ritual tradition of
challenging the existing hierarchies and expressing an alternative for the future. As Rabelais showed, food and humour offer a means for an examined existence.

**McDonald’s and grotesque imagery**

Global attempts by protestors to debase and mock McDonald’s, coupled with Boje, Driver and Cai’s recognition (2004) that McDonald’s uses this degradation to rejuvenate the company, leads Boje and Cai (2004) to interpret McDonald’s from a management studies perspective, using Bakhtin’s (1984) explanation of grotesque realism. Their effort is aimed at communicating a different perspective of the corporation than that normally found in the management literature.

As Rabelais and Bakhtin did, Boje and Cai first seek to convince the reader that this approach has intrinsic value, even though their analysis is in opposition to the accepted canon. From this defensive position, they proceed to apply the grotesque method to three realms of McDonald’s: McDonald’s corporation, McDonaldland and McDonaldisation.

Firstly, they suggest that McDonald’s grotesque corporate body can be witnessed in the intersection of the old and new body of the corporation. This dual body image is explained as death symbolised by the retirement of old workers and the life offered by new workers. Boje and Cai (2004, pp. 4-5) proceed by illustrating this process of metamorphosis in the development of Ronald McDonald, from the original image of 1963 through a number of incarnations, as another example of this process of regeneration and renewal.

Secondly, Boje and Cai (2004, p. 5) draw on the rich sphere of McDonaldland’s changing characters to showcase the grotesque nature of McDonald’s: “The folly of McDonaldland qualifies as deeply ambivalent grotesque humor, as a 21st century “feast of fools” and fast food banquet with a 16th century Rabelaisian legacy. McDonaldland, while G-rated, and carefully scripted to present the politically correct and strategically intended corporate image, has moments of corporate debasement.” Here in McDonaldland, Boje and Cai (2004, p. 6) argue that Bakhtinian scholars
would readily recognise the banquet imagery present, complete with its food fights and food theft.

Finally, looking outside the company itself, Boje and Cai (2004) touch on the more commonly perceived aspect of Carnival that has become associated with that of McDonald’s: the use that Ritzer offers of Carnival as an attraction in the process of McDonaldisation. By drawing together the relationship between the three spheres of McDonald’s, McDonaldland, and McDonaldisation, a map of the grotesque realism is presented. The gaping mouth of Hamburglar eating, devouring, swallowing, finds resonance in a view of McDonald’s devouring cultures or competitors, swallowing the whole world and giving birth to the global empire of new outlets. This is a McDonald’s interacting and transforming the world through the mouth. The same outward devouring of the world occurs as McDonaldisation swallows other industries and the world. This grotesque corporate imagery is then supplemented by the criticism of McDonald’s, which also has recourse to grotesque imagery. The use of official corporate imagery, mocked with the carnivalesque, is, Boje and Cai (2004, p. 8) contend, an important component of the overall grotesque realism that they see in McDonald’s.

Boje and Cai’s (2004) analysis provides insight into the reading of McDonald’s as an open text and the binary construct of order. In opposition to management literature that represents the hegemonic ‘high’ position, Boje and Cai (2004) offer an analysis that has sought to privilege the hierarchal ‘low’. This ambivalent perspective offers insight into the duality of meaning generated by McDonald’s. This duality is expressed in the class-based criticism contained in the “Hugging McDonald’s” phenomena by which Kincheloe (2002) is perplexed. Why, given the hegemonic oppression that so incenses him, do the lower classes in society express a fondness of McDonald’s?

McDonald’s, when viewed from the Bakhtinian perspective, can therefore be read as elevated, a popular festive form appealing to both the material and utopian outlook. It caters to the masses, making a direct appeal to the inclusive convivial folk culture. McDonald’s offers a restaurant experience that stands in defiant opposition to the culturally elite restaurant, by overturning the pretence of restaurant dining and
supplementing it with one that caters to simple and immediate bodily pleasures. Like Carnival, it provides a folk alternative, a ‘low’ means for the masses to recognise the construct of order. Here, McDonald’s provides an example of embourgeoisement, a carnivalesque expression of aspiration, to enjoy the bourgeois dining-out experience without the same recourse to social and economic capital.

**Ronald McDonald – clown, symbol of order or disorder?**

The clown Ronald McDonald is arguably one of the most powerful images of McDonald’s. An ambiguous image and corporate spokesperson drawn from the carnivalesque, he is described by the corporation’s website as “second only to Santa Claus in terms of recognition.” Beginning life in Washington in the early 1960’s as part of a local sponsorship of a franchised children’s television show called *Bozo’s Circus*, the clown Bozo proved successful in generating substantial in-store sales. When the show was cancelled the local McDonald’s, through an advertising agency, developed their own clown, drawing on McDonald’s images of hamburgers, fries and milkshakes to form a costume with the simple rhyming name: Ronald McDonald. Again the clown figure became a huge hit in the Washington area. Ronald was now offered to the McDonald’s national marketing director as a possible national spokesperson for the chain. Initially turned down as too corny, the idea that the clown Ronald McDonald could assume the mantle of company spokesperson was finally accepted, and launched by a national television campaign in 1965. From the beginning, the management of the clown’s image has been an important issue for the corporation. For example, the actor, Willard Scott, who had successfully played Bozo and who had personally suggested the name ‘Ronald McDonald,’ was judged to be too obese to play the new clown (Love, 1986, pp. 220-24). The initial image of Ronald has been gradually modified and carefully controlled in a process of rationalisation one that negates the darker trickster persona inherent in clowns, while enhancing the perception of the clown as a purely ‘lovable’ character with child appeal. Ronald McDonald, has been engineered as a purposeful, desired and coherent sign that meshes with the corporate agenda.

From this genesis, the purpose of Ronald McDonald has remained constant: to engender a sense of fun, appeal to children and, in turn, generate sales. Here, the
clown becomes an integral part of spectacle that is the McDonald’s experience. The clown is a sign and coherent part of the show business of selling not just burgers but, more broadly, the McDonald’s meal experience—and surreptitiously, the underlying values of the system. The clown adds to and reinforces the McDonald’s experience as a sign of the carnivalesque, the perception of an inversion of the traditional restaurant experience and the elevation of elements of the ‘low’, while still reinforcing the hegemonic order.

This managed use of the clown as a simple image of childish fun tries essentially to exclude the long and well-understood symbolic tradition of the sign. The clown image was historically constructed using the binary concepts of reversal and transgression. The clown is as a parody, symbolically displaying the opposite traits customarily associated with that of the king, and presents as a veneration of the symbolically ‘low’ and the grotesque. To fulfil this inherited role, the clown must operate within the framework of order, in the same manner that Douglas (1975, p. 260) argued that the meaning of a meal is in the repeated analogy of all meals. The apparently disordered nature of the clown is also ordered by these rules of ‘grammar’. To be read and understood as a clown, the clown must reflect the cultural conventions of what is expected from him. While his performance is ordered, it is the disorderly aspects of the clown that have the strongest meaning, the ability to transverse the boundaries between a represented world and the world of the here and now. This is a primary role McDonald’s requires of Ronald, to bring an element of fantasy and the mythical into the everyday. But this ability invests the clown with ambiguity, and for McDonald’s a loss of control over the image, as the clown crosses the boundary between the clown as performer, and that of the clown and the audience combined acting out a social drama—a state analogous to Bakhtin’s (1984, p. 7) carnival that allows no distinction between actor and spectator.

Like the Fool, who occupies a liminal social position, the clown is empowered with the responsibility of making his audience question its society. Both signs are positioned as hierarchically ‘low’ and are seen to stand outside society proper—a position thought to enable a special insight, to see ‘truths’ back into the society. The clown is obligated to inspire enthusiasm for the utopian view and also to create a fear of the widespread breakdown of existing order. Like Carnival itself, the clown,
through transgression, offers a flirtation with disorder, offering insight into the possibilities offered by the breakdown of the current order but ultimately reinforcing the existing order.

Given this symbolic tradition, particularly the inherent threat from disorder, it is somewhat surprising that a corporation famed for the rationalisation of order would actively choose to retain a clown as their official spokesperson. This is particularly the case when there has been a long tradition in literature of the clown who, when hired as a servant, turns out to be defiant and more trouble than he is worth. Ronald McDonald has necessitated the restructuring of order, to make the clown consistent with the desired imagery of McDonald’s. In an example of double inversion of hierarchical values, the clown, a normally ‘low’ symbol, is used as a symbolic reminder of the existence and power of the hegemony. The clown is a mock hero created by the temporary inversion of normal social hierarchies. With Ronald McDonald however, we have the portrayal of an actual hero, the low reversed back to high status, creating a problematic semiotic device. This complexity can be seen in Ronald McDonald as clown; now a hero elevated over others, he must remain distant, aloof, to be held in high esteem. Yet Ronald McDonald as the amicable clown must disregard these hierarchies and be democratic in his friendship with all children. He must concurrently be an international star, a spokesperson for a multinational corporation, and be approachable as every child’s friend. If the image management of McDonald’s is aimed at the manufacture of simple unambiguous messages favourable to the company, then the choice of its clown symbol is vexed. The confusion arises in the use of a traditionally ambiguous symbol, one that asks people to question their society, appropriated into a role that is active in the promotion of hegemonic values, and, as some critics argue, unthinking consumption.

The strength and resilience of the traditional symbolism remains clearly visible. Anti-McDonald protestors regularly appropriate and make use of Ronald’s image, often in ways that draw on humour and grotesque realism to debase McDonald’s. Here the symbolic legacy of the clown is evident, the request to question society’s values answered in the ongoing moral criticism levelled at Ronald for commercial exploitation. The power of disorder in the persona of clown as agent of change is clearly viewed in light of Boje, Driver and Cai’s (2004) argument that McDonald’s
has used such incidents of degradation in a regenerative manner. Control by simple rationalisation of the sign has not proved possible; Ronald McDonald has presented his masters the challenge faced by the bricoleur, of creating a new form of order while the history of the elements remains to influence interpretation.

**Conclusion**

McDonald’s has clearly articulated that it understands that it is in show business. As a restaurant, it sells an experience that has as an integral component, imagery. The challenge faced is not as simple as injecting ‘fun’ and ‘excitement’ into the McDonaldised spectacle. For McDonald’s, the challenge has been to create a coherent and consistent image that reflects the corporation’s desired construct of order, by drawing on existing symbolic systems--such as brand ‘America’, to create its own paleo-symbol.

This challenge has been exacerbated for McDonald’s by its construct of order, one that has sought to bring together two opposing symbolic systems: a forging of the duality of order by unification of the twin worldviews that Bourdieu (1979) described as antagonistic. McDonald’s has become a complex sign that is read as an open text, a modern version of Rabelais’ intertwined competing narratives. McDonald’s interpreted as both a representation of the rationalisation of order and the hegemony and as an expression of the carnivalesque, the hierarchically ‘low’ and disordered, a challenge to the hegemony.

McDonald’s has successfully fused form and function into an unprecedented food service triumph. It has become an image for its time, a sign of a social order that represents the interface of modernity and postmodernity. This increasingly monopolistic position of power has generated corporate success, but in a ‘hot’ society this power over order will generate disorder, aimed at holding order to account. The image of McDonald’s remains ambiguous, shaped by the constant order/disorder dialectic and the duality of order.

For the consumer of McDonald’s food, there may not necessarily be an intention of buying into a semiotic debate. But, as Brillat-Savarin’s second, third and fourth
aphorisms proclaim, in partaking is a symbolic demonstration of the individual’s or collective’s value system. Firstly, by eating McDonald’s there is an expression of Bakhtinian carnivalesque global solidarity of folk culture, joining together with all others who have shared the experience. Secondly, there is a demonstration of subservience to the hegemony, in an articulation of Elias’s ‘civilising process’. The importance of McDonald’s as a dominant sign of the late twentieth century is not as a symbol of corporate and social order but its power as an ambiguous food sign. Food remains symbolically ambiguous, a ritual and physical link between the individual and the world, a representation of order, a sign of the triumph of humans in living. It is an expression of the primary binary. Symbolically, McDonald’s can be read as a ritual image used to stimulate an examined existence, the disorder allowing the possibility of ‘eating a better world’.
Chapter 8--the political economy of McDonald’s

As a social institution, McDonald’s has become a familiar part of everyday late twentieth-century Western society. A restaurant positioned at the historical interface between the order of modernity and ‘disorder’ of postmodernity, McDonald’s can be understood as ordered by modernity, the construct of restaurant order that Finkelstein (1989) outlined. McDonald’s also purposefully draws on elements of the carnivalesque to create a dining experience that positions McDonald’s as a challenge to the concept of the traditional restaurant. The image created of McDonald’s is ambivalent, a recognition of McDonald’s’ position at the intersection of the two competing histories. The image of McDonald’s is a result of the dialectic between order and disorder.

It is from this ambivalent position, a liminal relationship to the traditional restaurant of modernity, that McDonald’s emerges as a symbol of a new form of order. The purposeful combination of the antagonistic elements of form and function within the McDonald’s restaurant experience has produced a sign conveying a rich, complex and ambiguous message. Interpreted by the bricoleur, the sign can become political. Read from the ‘top-down’ perspective of Elias’s history, McDonald’s represents a highly rationalised spectacle of work, a sign of the global success of the American value system and hegemony. When read from the ‘bottom-up’ perspective of Bakhtin, McDonald’s can be seen to present ‘disorder’, a challenge to the status quo. This disorder can serve as a catalyst for engaging in an examined existence.

Behind the social institution that is McDonald’s--the McDonald’s corporation

Love (1986) presents his authorised history of the company in the manner of a useful key, unlocking the reality of McDonald’s by seeking to differentiate between the ubiquitous public face of McDonald’s and the largely unknown corporate reality. The public perception has been ordered by the familiar, the restaurants, the advertising and the media coverage of the company, that all draw heavily from the corporate mythologies: the hero tale of Ray Kroc, reports of sales expressed in
carnivalesque terms such as ‘rivers of ketchup the size of the Mississippi,’ or ‘hamburgers in a line that could stretch to the moon.’

This, Love (1986, p. 2) suggested, is a deliberate strategy of the McDonald’s corporation to highlight a superficial approach, rather than facilitate any indepth analysis of how the company operates or the impact of these operations on society. Love is keen to distinguish myth from reality, to contrast the public intimacy with the company profile and explain the not-so-well known economic and social power of the McDonald’s corporation. The figures presented are now dated but this does not diminish the impact that Love hopes to convey:

McDonald’s captures 17 percent of all restaurant visits in the United States – one out of every six – commands a 7.3 percent share of all dollars Americans spend on eating out. How many would know that it controls 19.5 percent of the $45 billion fast-food market in the U.S. -- more than the next three chains combined? How many would suspect that McDonald’s sells 32 percent of all hamburgers by commercial restaurants and 26 percent of all french fries? (Love, 1986, p. 3).

While these figures are impressive, Love (1986, pp. 3-5) suggests that the extent of the dominance of this centralised power is best witnessed in the impact that this level of market share has on the general economy, employment, purchasing and allied industries. As a major purchaser of food commodities, McDonald’s has wrought significant changes to agriculture and food processing industries. Love (1986, pp. 3-5) reports that about one out of every fifteen American workers had their first job with McDonald’s. McDonald’s is the world’s largest owner of retail real estate. McDonald’s has the power, through the introduction of new menu items, to change the eating habits of most Americans and to create fortunes for particular processors and growers.

Love’s book offers more than a chronicle of the history of the company’s success and its creed of expansion. He provides insight into the creation of the image that has become the reality of McDonald’s, and highlights the enormous political power that is invested in McDonald’s. This political power, when understood by reference to Elias’s (1994) argument, translates into the corporation’s ability to help generate a
self-serving social order. This is as a result of not only its global economic success, but also because it is a catalyst to imitators’ attempts to copy its successful formula. This aspirational behaviour by imitators is integral to the ‘civilising process’ and serves to reproduce the copied form of order. Love (1986) tempers this veneration of McDonald’s form of order, by recognising that there is also an inherent and often purposeful ambiguity projected by the corporation. Love’s recognition that McDonald’s also displays an element of disorder sets McDonald’s as an open text or sign, open to multiple and conflicting interpretations. By following Love’s (1986) history of McDonald’s success, a trace is established of McDonald’s move from a product of an emerging order, to the signifier of the existing order.

**McDonald’s as a signifier of order**

The success of McDonald’s as a signifier of order has been incorporated into and is now sold as an integrated part of the McDonald’s restaurant experience. With the food, the experience contains representations of the values of the system that created the concept. This is particularly evident in markets that are distinguished as the cultural ‘other’. McDonald’s values are sold in the language of the dominant order, tapping into a wider and readily understood system of signs and meaning to communicate a deliberate story. In its retelling, this has further intensified the ideology it is seen to represent. McDonald’s has successfully tapped the needs and now the values of bourgeois American culture. It can be read as a sign for the success of the values that support twentieth-century American mass-market consumer culture, as supplied by large-scale industrialised conglomerates. While other Western countries share some or all of these values, America, because of its dominance, is read as the sign for them. In turn, America can also be read as Lévi-Strauss’s archetypal ‘hot’ society and placed in the position of the dominant power in relationship to Elias’s ‘civilising process’. With structuralism’s understanding of a coherent nature of order, McDonald’s and America are interchangeable signs for brand ‘America’.

This is the second time during the twentieth century that this American system of order has been signified in a global context by a food-related symbol. Initially, the drink Coca-Cola, and now McDonald’s, have been used to signify (as end products)
a particular system of work. This use is analogous to the traditional use of bread as a symbol of work and social order, thus maintaining a consistency in the symbolic culinary language. Both commodities, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, have been invested with a ‘meta-symbolism’ that promotes an open reading capable of conveying diverse and conflicting messages or signifying whole debates. This ordering property of food, and use of food as a sign of order, the surface representation of deep structures, is picked up in Ritzer’s (1993, 1998) McDonaldisation thesis.

Ritzer (1993, 1998), ignoring the inherent duality of order, adopts a limited ‘top-down’ perspective to build on the theory of the rationalisation developed by the German social theorist Max Weber. Weber’s work describes a process of social transformation that reflects the social trajectory proposed by both Elias’s ‘civilising process’ and Lévi-Strauss’s primary binary. With a focus firmly on order, Ritzer identifies the principles of order used by McDonald’s to structure their fast-food restaurant experience, to explain the changes he perceived in the wider social order. In Ritzer’s argument, McDonald’s becomes a metaphor for the order that was born out of modernity and has begun to shape postmodernity. This use of McDonald’s as a sign, helps to highlight a shift of emphasis in society, as order shapes not only production but increasingly consumption. This change of emphasis is important in highlighting the dynamics of the change to order, as McDonald’s becomes a sign caught between competing concepts of order at the interface between modernity and postmodernity.

Ritzer (1998) in *The McDonaldization Thesis*, displays an awareness of his critics arguments. Citing exceptions to McDonaldisation, thus attempting to highlight deficiencies with the theory, the contention is that the concept is too generalised. Coupled with this line of criticism is the notion that Ritzer has focused predominantly on the negative aspects of McDonaldisation, this stance can be interpreted as a display of class bias and social elitism over the concepts signified by the mass appeal of McDonald’s. Both lines of attack are predictable and justified, serving to highlight the binary structuring of order, social hierarchy building, and the relationship of order to disorder in a ‘hot’ society. Ritzer (1998, p. 174) concedes that “Perhaps no idea would seem more extreme, at least from the perspective of the
McDonaldization thesis, than the notion that we are already beginning to see signs of de-McDonaldization.” What is lacking in either the criticism or the defence of Ritzer’s argument is the acknowledgment of the order/disorder dialectic, that both the order of McDonaldisation and the opposing ‘disordered’ position are mutually dependent. Both order and disorder are required to map the order that is evident in the sign of McDonald’s. Ritzer’s thinking on McDonaldisation, however, has not remained static and has been transformed by recognition of ‘de-McDonaldisation’. Elements of disorder can be seen to have challenged Ritzer’s thesis, generating a change in his thinking that can now be seen to embrace also a ‘bottom-up’ perspective of order generation.

Ritzer (2003a) has advanced his thesis by including a theory to explain the social geography of his McDonaldisation of society. Dismissing both Weber’s ‘iron cage’ and Foucault’s ‘carceral archipelago’ as less than ideal images in understanding McDonaldisation, Ritzer advances an image of ‘islands of the dead’ to illustrate his developed understanding of the spatial image created by McDonaldisation. Within this schema three essential elements of the image of these ‘islands’ are advanced. These elements explain that McDonaldisation happens in pockets on ‘islands’ surrounded by ‘seas’ teeming with life. Just as with natural islands, there is a reluctance to leave any one island except to travel unscathed to another island. Secondly, the islands support a lively existence that is characterised by non-stop carnivals. Here the inhabitants are fascinated by and increasingly revel in this McDonaldised existence. Paradoxically, the third element, is according to Ritzer, is that these islands are ‘dead,’ lacking life with real meaning. “Although they are vibrant with life, these McDonaldized islands are simultaneously “dead” in many senses of the term” (Ritzer, 2003a, p. 124).

This expressed ambiguity, related to the life and ‘death’ on the islands, is a significant step forward in Ritzer’s understanding of the construct of order. Ritzer’s construct can now be viewed to incorporate an understanding of the need for dialectic between order and disorder, to generate the ordering properties that we have witnessed in both the notion of the ‘hot’ society and the ‘civilising process’. Ritzer can now be seen to have arrived at a similar position to that articulated by Rabelais: that the meaningful life is in the examined existence found in the embrace of
disorder. For Ritzer, the McDonaldised existence is only a substitute for a more fulfilling, non-McDonaldised existence. Ritzer (2003a, p. 128) argues that the form of living he perceives on these islands is separated, even alienated from the rest of life. It is life removed intentionally of risk, according to Ritzer; this in itself is ambiguous, being both simultaneously desirable and undesirable. Ritzer (2003a, p. 128) suggests that this planned-for environment and seemingly attractive existence is in fact “dull, boring and routine”. This state demonstrates a fulfilment of Elias’s (1994, p. 47) concept of “pacified social spaces,” bought by individual subservience and the monopolisation of ‘economic’ means. This mode of living is a duplication of the ‘incivility’ that restaurant order generates in Finkelstein’s thesis.

The ‘island’ metaphor proves useful for Ritzer when mapping his perspective of the order/disorder dialectic. The ‘islands’ are read as havens of order, constructed to be immune from the disorder inherent in the everyday. The planners and managers of these ‘islands’ are seen to have a vested interest in the creation of structures that replicate the hegemony, employing elements of the carnivalesque. This use of the carnivalesque is a modern application of the concept of ‘bread and circuses’, fascinating the masses, but by nature -- and seeming paradoxical -- ‘deadening’. This evocation of elements of the carnivalesque is aimed at making both the site and its inhabitants easier to manage, by removing the unpredictability that could be generated by genuine disorder. Against this rationalisation there is a ‘hot’ society dynamism expressed by some residents. It seeks to reinvigorate and breathe life back into the island by drawing on the ‘bottom-up’ order depicted by Bakhtin (1984). This order/disorder dialectic is clearly evident in the fast-food example offered by Ritzer. Fast-food restaurants need teenage customers but seek, by creating a particular manifestation of order, to eliminate any opportunity for the same customers to occupy the restaurant for anything but the absolute minimum time. This minimises risk posed by their possible disorder. This sets up a dialectic for Ritzer (2003a, p. 133), as some patrons seek to create life within the McDonaldised site whilst those who control the site seek to minimise or eliminate that life.

The force of McDonaldised order to shape society and annihilate disorder can be seen in the anti-McDonald’s gastronomic movement Slow Food, and its use of calculability as an expression of the self-proclaimed quality and success of the
movement. For example, Slow’s publication *Vini d’Italia* has “gone from a initial print run of 5000 copies to one of more than 100,000 in print today (with more than 250,000 copies each of the German and English versions).” The 2001 edition featured “‘three-glass’ rankings, 1,681 producers, and 12,045 wines” (Petrini, 2001, p. 46). Ritzer (1998, p. 191) contends that this type of act is an example of the rationalisation of the irrational, a phenomenon that he has predicted will characterise the future of McDonaldisation. What Ritzer has labelled the ‘rationalization of the irrational’ is a function of the inherent drive to change of a ‘hot’ society, as order constantly engages in the dialectic with disorder.

The challenge afforded by this change, and the ambivalent position of McDonald’s as order, can be viewed clearly in the process of McDonald’s initial stage of insertion into a particular culture. Constructed as disorder, McDonald’s is read as a challenge to the traditional order; this disorder is ambivalent, read either as a potentially positive sign, holding out the promise of modernity, or read as a potentially destructive force. This ambiguous reading of McDonald’s as a sign is clearly articulated by Kincheloe (2002), in his own love/hate dialectic with McDonald’s. Kincheloe moves from reading McDonald’s as a sign of the arrival of modernity in his boyhood home, the mountains of rural East Tennessee, to a later realisation that this modernity was something he did not wish to possess. He recognises that this change in feelings mirrors a more general malaise, related to modernity.

As a sign of change, McDonald’s also reflects its genesis, a product of a period of broad social change in America. Watson (1997, pp. 14-20) suggests that this correlation of McDonald’s and social change can be repeatedly witnessed. As McDonald’s expanded outwards from America, a similar relationship between the rise in affluence, social conditions and the start-up dates of McDonald’s can be observed in a variety of marketplaces.

This incorporation of McDonald’s as ‘disorder’ into an existing order is clearly marked, as Watson (1997) traces McDonald’s acceptance into South East Asia. McDonald’s is portrayed as an enterprise seen to transform from a symbol of disorder; to signifier of a new and hierarchically privileged modish experience, enjoyed by a few; to a somewhat hierarchically challenged and diffuse sign of mass
culture. This change is also a result of the order/disorder dialectic, as McDonald’s is seemingly transformed by the order of the local culture to suit its own requirements. This process is central to Watson’s thesis and gives credence to Ritzer’s (2003a, pp. 131-2) assertion that those living on his ‘dead’ ‘islands’ will seek to engender the McDonaldised islands with a sense of liveliness. This hope, however, maybe tempered:

Invested with human creativity, people are likely to balk at dead structures and their demands and seek to bring as much life to them as possible. This, of course, assumes that such structures and those like them have not, over the years, done their work and reduced or eliminated this urge to live (Ritzer, 2003a, p. 132).

It is concern about this unquestioning acceptance of hegemonic order that fuels Kincheloe’s (2002) critique of McDonald’s. Reading into the humble hamburger a rich, and what he views as at times dangerous, level of cultural and political power, Kincheloe makes a call to his readers to learn to read ‘the sign of the burger’ and look more closely at the true nature of the world. This call echoes Rabelais, who also asked his readers to look beyond the superficial and seemingly frivolous to examine and seek out a truth, to engage in life. Kincheloe, Ritzer and Rabelais join together in a chorus that calls others to be wary of hegemony and those who seek to dominate. It is this uncritical acceptance of order that provokes Kincheloe (2002, pp. 166-70) to accuse Watson of naiveté, in not recognising the full extent of cultural homogenisation generated by McDonald’s, and for failing to understand the direction of real change and power. Kincheloe argues that the forces of hegemony have imposed their order more subtly by creating the perception of local influence, while actually turning the global not into a solitary homogenised global, as Ritzer (1993, 1998) suggested initially, but, as Ritzer (2003a) has come to suggest, a sea full of similar ‘islands’, a homogeneous global culture embraced and modified superficially by the local.

Kincheloe’s critique of Watson as naïve for not recognising the full extent and function of the hegemonic order could also be levelled at Kincheloe. Kincheloe’s own questioning of the hegemony is an example of the integral functioning of a ‘hot’ society. Existing order must be challenged to produce progress, to prevent
stagnation. But this form of questioning does not overturn society; it acts as Carnival does and ultimately reinforces hegemony. Despite his warning of the power of McDonald’s and the American hegemony that McDonald’s signifies, Kincheloe (2002, p 213) can be seen to be naïve and subservient, questioning of but remaining subservient to the hegemony that shaped McDonald’s, with his call for people to “discard the semiotically expended ‘American Dream’ and create a more complex and just global dream – a global dream where American optimism plays a socially responsible role.” The sign of the burger may have been assigned to the ‘low’ and thus debased by Kincheloe, however the structure of order that elevates ‘Brand America’ remains dominant, thus allowing McDonald’s to draw legitimacy and compliance by association by default.

The aim for McDonald’s as a sign of hegemonic power is subtly to convince the market that what it is being given is indeed what it desires: that people really enjoy living on Ritzer’s ‘island’; that in consumption lies happiness. This ordering of reality is most clearly observed in a cross-cultural context, particularly where a hierarchical differential is significant. In lesser-developed countries, for instance, there is an illusion that says purchasing at McDonald’s allows the opportunity to purchase what they are conditioned to desire: modernity and the utopian American dream. By this purchase of a McDonald’s experience, one demonstrates an engagement within the ‘civilising process’, the aspirational drive of the primary binary in one’s desire to negate some of one’s cultural differences. The process is not, however, linear or without resistance. For McDonald’s, it is vital that not only hamburgers are sold, but also its ideology, its system of order.

**McDonald’s as a neo colonial power**

A feature of the system of order identified by Elias is the push for monopolistic domination. After numerous failed attempts at diversification into other businesses in the USA, and buoyed by the continued domestic growth of its hamburger sales, Love (1986, p. 417) records that McDonald’s corporate solution for growth was simple. McDonald’s would look offshore, determine if there was a market there and, in the early 1970’s, attempt “what no American retailer had ever done – successfully expand its service worldwide.” As Love explains, McDonald’s would not be faced
with several hamburger chains as competition, as it was in the domestic market. He records, however, that it did face a significant challenge:

the market was even more virgin than that. Most countries had no locally based fast-food outlets, either. Indeed, eating out – an increasingly routine experience for Americans – was an uncommon experience in most foreign markets. In Europe particularly, restaurants were still locked into traditions of full linen service, waiters in black tie, wine stewards, and multicourse meals. There were virtually no family restaurants, and thus for the middle class eating out was always a special occasion. To succeed abroad, McDonald’s had to introduce a major cultural change (Love, 1986, pp. 417-8).

Love’s assessment serves to illuminate both the challenge faced by McDonald’s and the existence of an American-biased culinary hegemony, structured in opposition to the European culinary hegemony.

The reordering of cultural practices was not a new challenge for McDonald’s; it had once been integral to domestic development. Internationally, however, the task would be compounded. McDonald’s had to export not just the McDonald’s restaurant experience and menu, but also the elements of the American culture that underpin this genre of fast-food. As the history of this genre demonstrates, the development of McDonald’s was reliant on a particularly supportive set of social and economic conditions, particularly in relationship to the rise of the bourgeoisie.

Internationally success for McDonald’s, Love (1986, p 424-5) contends, was not as simple as the straight imposing of McDonald’s upon a culture, but was reliant upon building local connections with the American concept. A process of localisation of suppliers, management and staff was integral to building the desired compromised image of American/local. But this localisation, as Love (1986, pp. 432-3) notes, was tempered by the personalities of many of the local overseas managing directors of McDonald’s, who expressed a strong admiration for the American way of doing things. It was their promotion of the broader values of American order that allowed McDonald’s to build initial acceptance and gradually implement and foster change in
the order of the host culture. This expression of the dialectic is important, stressing the importance of disorder and generating change to produce new forms of order.

The establishment of McDonald’s restaurants outside the United States serves to highlight a reading of McDonald’s as a sign of disorder. In some cultures the threat of change presented by McDonald’s has served as a catalyst, to examine and debate nationalism and the perceived spread of an American monopoly of order. This is not a new sentiment; it taps the earlier sign of the analogous ‘Americanisation’ expressed by the term ‘Coco-Colaisation’. Both incidences, while historically separate, represent similar assessments and have been responsible for generating analogous responses. In the twentieth century, both the humble hamburger and a soft drink have been used in the mode of traditional food symbolism to represent the dominant new form of social order. In both instances there remains a manifestation of the ghost of a colonial past, where the invader has sought to ‘civilise’, not just to conquer, but to make the ‘not like’ culture more ‘like’.

This inequality between cultures helps generate the utopian qualities represented in the sign of McDonald’s. This reading of McDonald’s as Utopia is an extrapolated manifestation of the desire central to Finkelstein’s (1989) concept of general restaurant order. The purchase of a product such as Coca-Cola and now McDonald’s has been ordered and used symbolically to sell an attainable experience of the ‘American good life’. Kincheloe was not alone in seeking to fulfil his desire in the McDonald’s experience; others writers have also documented a similar expression. Kottak (1978) explored the rituals of McDonald’s and how, as with religion, eating at the restaurant offered a promise of hope; a hope bound to the culture of the United States. Boym (2001) reminisced about how, as a young immigrant from Moscow in 1981, he had experienced his first McDonald’s meal. A later example recalled by Boym is a guest from the Soviet Union who leaps at the opportunity to eat at McDonald’s. These American-based examples of the quest for modernity within McDonald’s are now rightly perceived as archaic, with the increasing market maturity of McDonald’s.

The search for modernity within McDonald’s has moved, with the expansion of McDonald’s from the United States to its gradual spread around the world. As
McDonald’s opens for operation in each new country, similar patterns of behaviour and desire to those expressed by Kincheloe and others are repeated. In the late 1970’s in France (Fantasia 1995), the spread of McDonald’s has been set against the backdrop of Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy and the French view of their own culture. Quoting a French restaurant industry trade magazine, Neo Restauration, Fantasia (1995, p. 213) states that “Fast food remains a purely American product, something new, somewhat snobby and very Parisian, so much so that the last fashion show by Daniel Hechter included a buffet catered by McDonald’s.” Bell and Valentine (1997, p. 172) consider this example to be further evidence of Bourdieu’s (1984) observation of how food is used as a social marker in France, and an example of a transgressive rejection of the seriousness often associated with French food.

In Israel, Azaryahu (2000) talks of McDonald’s as the sign of “the new face of Israel,” as Israel embraces the new ‘American’ way of life. “McDonald’s was first introduced into Israel in October 1993...The public fascination with it was not so much with hamburgers but mainly with its long-established reputation as an icon of the ‘American way of life’” (Azaryahu, 2000, p. 11). In Istanbul, Chase (1992) tells a similar story and in Asia the story is repeated.

The purposeful pursuit of Western values by Singapore has transformed the city from one “of material privation to one of, as many would say, excessive consumption” (Chua, 2000, p. 184). Here the embrace of McDonald’s is almost part of the State’s government policy of embracing global capitalism and westernizing the Asian city state. The embrace of McDonald’s in other Asian locations is explored in Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia (Watson, 1997). Tracing the moment from being the exotic ‘other’, offering a taste of modernity, to acceptance as part of the everyday, Watson maps the progression of McDonald’s across Asia: Tokyo in 1971, Hong Kong in 1975, Taipei in 1984, Seoul in 1988, and Beijing in 1992. Each time McDonald’s begins operation in a new country it assumes the role of a sign of utopian future, a sign of Americanism, offering the opportunity of inclusion into and belonging to globalism and the new world order. As with the sentiment expressed by Kincheloe’s (2002, p 27) view of McDonald’s as a utopia, the sentiment can change as the myth moves to reality, the desire left unfulfilled.
The gradual incorporation of McDonald’s into another culture and its shift from sign of disorder to order illustrates the working of order and structuring by social hierarchies. In a ‘hot’ society, order holds out that satisfaction can be found in change, in the new and novel, that by changing to the new it will be in some way better. But this constant demand to seek out the new helps to create a love/hate relationship with the present. A state of constant restlessness is generated. This restlessness becomes the general malaise of modernity, as the satisfaction sought must be continually found elsewhere. This pressure to change generates a feeling of uncertainty: how do we know that the new will be better? Coupled with this is the pressure to maintain one’s relative place within the social hierarchy. The constant embrace of the new does however provide a convenient vehicle to display high economic and cultural capital. This construct of order also explains the progressive movement of dining at McDonald’s as a status symbol down the social hierarchy, as McDonald’s matures in any given market.

While this drift may eventually bring about the demise of McDonald’s as it reaches the end of its product life cycle (there are indications that this has begun to happen in some markets), in the shorter term it helps McDonald’s to provide a sense of order and a sign of stability in a world of turmoil. McDonald’s is seen as an ‘island’ of predictability, an oasis of comfort, security, cleanliness and reassurance. As Kottak (1978, p. 77) reminds us, especially for the American travelling in a foreign country, “An American’s devotion to McDonald’s rests in part on the uniformities associated with almost all McDonald’s: setting, architecture, food, ambience, acts and utterances.” Love (1986, p. 447) cites a similar comment from an Australian woman after travelling in the Soviet Union: “‘I had a terrible time trying to get used to the food there,’ she wrote, ‘but when we pulled into Frankfurt on our way back, we saw a McDonald’s. It was just like being at home.’” In these examples, McDonald’s serves as a universal landmark of the stability and safety of order--not just standardised fare, but also a value system that has a negating effect on the need or desire to understand the ‘other’.

While read as a sign of order and stability in a world of turmoil, McDonald’s remains an agent of change. Recognising what Brillat-Savarin had known--that taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled--McDonald’s has had to set out to shape
taste in an image of its choosing. For example, “gradually the Australian managers realized what Fujita had discovered early on: McDonald’s had better luck changing local eating habits than adapting its menu to fit them” (Love, 1986, p. 453). Globally McDonald’s has had to work at overturning existing food habits and substituting behaviour and tastes that are more attuned to the needs of its operation. The significance of McDonald’s achievement can be gauged by reference to the stability of food systems that we viewed in the research of Douglas and Nicod (1974) and Nicod (1974).

Changing food habits is only a surface representation of the deeper social changes attributed to the political power of McDonald’s. Kincheloe (2002) argues that the movement from modernity to postmodernity offers even greater and more pervasive opportunities for corporations such as McDonald’s to participate in the creation of desired forms of social order. While not abandoning the world of late modernity, a world Ritzer characterised by the sign of McDonald’s, postmodernity offers a different social construct in which the traditional notions of time and place are changed by the “electronic images bombarding us from local, national, and international venues” (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 77). Coupled with this continual barrage of messages is the legacy of McDonaldisation. Kincheloe (2002, p. 78) describes the combined effect:

fast food is tailor-made for fast capitalism in an accelerated postmodern society. Such instantaneity and disposability extend beyond fast food and McDonald’s, as values, lifestyles, and relationships become obsolescent. As meaning is destabilized, as more happens in a given period of time, individuals begin to lose touch with what came before the instant. Time dislocation undermines our personal and social histories, in the process of decontextualizing our identities and institutions. This atrophy of memory or social amnesia has profound consequences, for as the past is forgotten, its power over the present is obscured. The amnesia makes “what is” seem as if “it had to be.”

Within this hyper-reality there is an active encouragement of a superficial approach to living that begins to obscure the structural elements of a society. The deep questioning of life advocated by Rabelais is anathema, replaced by a world that holds
consumer consumption as a means of self-fulfilment. Order is seemingly created out of pseudo-memories and a bricolage of values and ideals that are transposable, but serve to further the aims and hegemony of an unimpeded free enterprise system. Life begins increasingly to resemble the form of living Ritzer ascribes to his ‘islands’, a life Ritzer (2003a, p. 124) admits holds some attraction. Life on the ‘islands’ is structured by the firms that ‘own McDonaldisation,’ by drawing upon symbols of the carnivalesque to create a life of spectacle. People, Ritzer (2003a) suggests, are drawn to the non-stop display of Carnival. However, this is not the carnivalesque of Bakhtin, but rather a sanitised version devoid of Carnival’s regenerative power.

Ritzer’s analysis provides a useful insight into the dialectic between order and disorder, particularly the increase in the rationalisation of order, but Ritzer stops short of fully recognising the power of disorder to counter McDonaldisation. Lévi-Strauss’s ‘hot’ society will function by producing disorder, particularly in response to the situation that Elias predicted, where an entity has an increasing monopolistic position. In response to increasingly monopolistic order, sections of society become disenfranchised by and dissatisfied with the gap between myth and reality, causing them to seek redress by recourse to disorder. Just as the owners of McDonaldisation try to create a society where they can impose power over others, creating self-favouring social hierarchies, so too will others try to overturn these hierarchies by advancing their own interests. The binary that produces order, must also produce disorder to hold the system in balance. Excesses in a top-down control will generate a reaction from the dominated, with a ‘bottom-up’ attempt to counter the oppression.

**McDonald’s as a catalyst of disorder: the reaction against the dominant paradigm**

The political power of McDonald’s cannot only be gauged by the significant numbers of consumers who, by buying into the McDonald’s version of a global communal meal, express empathy with the McDonald’s value system, but also in the widespread antagonism generated by the corporation. This opposition to the power of McDonald’s is a manifestation of entropy or disorder and is integral to the overall functioning of a ‘hot’ society. The polarisation of sentiment, the creation of a love/hate binary is critical. This polarised response reflects the nature of order and
the dynamics of a system of social hierarchies that maps winners and losers. The system’s differentials generate disorder and change as a ‘bottom-up’ influence. This disorder in turn serves to hold the political power of order to account.

In a consumer society the building of hierarchies, based upon the haves and have-nots, will inevitably generate a backlash of unsatisfied desire and general restlessness. These are created by the need to maintain the current status quo encapsulated by the social differentials. Traditional social safety valves, such as the ritual of Carnival, which temporarily relieved hegemonic pressure, have been largely closed or diminished—paradoxically in an effort to maintain order. The ritual inversion and mocking of the dominant institutions provided a means to escape however temporarily or illusionary from the cage of subjugation. The ritual mocking of order by employing food symbolism was a central element to Carnival practice. This symbolic use of food draws upon food’s ambivalent position and value as a surface representation of the deeper values of society, particularly the symbolic link between food and the means of production. Production of food (symbolic ‘work’) is the conventional motive and arena of subjugation. This traditional and symbolic use of the food is one essential element in explaining why globally McDonald’s has been the particular focus of numerous protests against the broader concept of ‘Americanisation’.

These displays of entropy must be communicated in the language that currently defines the order of the system, using simple binaries that encode the values of ‘high’ and ‘low’. This articulation though the simple polar value of the binaries does not however diminish the subtlety and complexity of the protestor’s argument. This recourse to disorder as a function of the order/disorder dialectic can be clearly witnessed in the late 1990’s example of the ‘McLibel’ case. This case also clearly illustrates the system’s propensity to quash dissent by annihilating disorder.

The ‘McLibel’ case witnessed the multinational McDonald’s corporation pitted against two unemployed individuals in what became the longest trial in British legal history. The catalyst was the publication and distribution of a protest pamphlet that was critical of McDonald’s operational practices. Here the protest was against both McDonald’s the corporation and McDonald’s as a sign of order, a signifier of what
was perceived to be wrong with America, globalisation, capitalism etc. The fight was taken up with enormous energy and fervour through the media, itself a representative of the hegemony, and on to a wider audience with the protest and the protestors reported in terms of simple binary opposition, good versus evil, high versus low, small versus giant. This presented an inverted symbolic structure and the preferencing of a different set of values to those presented by McDonald’s. At the core of the dispute was the protestors’ stated desire to present a counter political view that would hold the hegemony to account.

The ‘McLibel’ case attracted world media attention but equally resolute opposition has also been recorded against McDonald’s at the local level. Located to the west of Sydney, the City of the Blue Mountains is a region with a history of recognition of its natural beauty and of the distinctive character and heritage of its human settlement. In 1995, and again in 1997, there were local campaigns to keep a McDonald’s restaurant out of the upper Blue Mountains.

The city’s location, in a world heritage-listed national parkland, has helped foster a recognised social ethos, described by the local council in its Social Profile (1996, p. 69) as “the backdrop for a society where quality of life is highly regarded,” with a city ethos based upon the image of the Blue Mountains as “A City of the Arts.” The city council has a stated mission to develop the city, delivering social, cultural and economic benefits for residents and tourists by maximising opportunities for “life enhancing exchange” experiences (history, architecture, relationship to the built and natural environment, social interaction, and artistic expressions of painting, literature, sculpture, music and dance). Local character and this stance by the Blue Mountains City Council have combined to produce a perception of the Mountains as an area that is somewhat ‘alternative’. In 1995, and again in 1997, McDonald’s announced plans to develop a new restaurant in the vicinity of the upper Blue Mountains’ township of Katoomba. The lodgement of each development application with the city council became the catalyst for a successful public campaign to keep McDonald’s out of the region. (As of 2007, the upper Blue Mountains still does not have a McDonald’s restaurant.)
On reading the numerous letters to the local newspaper, the Blue Mountains Gazette, it is clear that the fight to keep McDonald’s out of the region polarised the community. The letters expressed strong emotions, often in the language of simple binary opposites, articulating either a pro- or anti-McDonald’s stance. This was not just a battle about hamburgers, but rather the semiotic representation of McDonald’s as a cultural sign. The debate was framed in the now familiar contest between global and local. The upper Blue Mountains was portrayed in images of the local. Anti-McDonald’s protestors drew on arguments that focused attention on the cultural homogenising force that McDonald’s was seen to represent. They portrayed McDonald’s in a similar way to Douglas’s (1966, p. 35) “matter out of place”, with the protestors’ argument that by granting development, the Council would be helping to pollute and destruct the unique environment that is the Blue Mountains. The destruction articulated included concern for the philosophical endangerment of the whole social fabric, expressed as the potential loss of the Mountains’ particular ‘sense of place,’ its ‘spirituality’ or of its very ‘integrity.’ Others argued their points pragmatically, in the language of the dominant paradigm, citing damage to the world heritage listing of the national park, loss of public amenities, adverse environmental and social impacts, endangerment of Mountains’ lifestyle, and the extension of the city ‘rat race’ into the Mountains. This was backed by a more corporeal line of argument which sought to highlight the negative effects of McDonald’s in terms of traffic movement, litter and the effect on locally-owned small business.

The pro-McDonald’s argument sought to paint a picture of the local offered a chance to transform its archaic circumstances, and so to be included in the world of modernity. McDonald’s would not only offer the desirable restaurant experience, complete with clean toilets, airconditioning, affordable food (argued as a particular benefit for families), and a place that would welcome children. Socially, McDonald’s would offer the upper Mountains’ community much needed employment and training opportunities for its local ‘bored’ youth. It would be a modern business, rather than the current crop, which were portrayed as ‘tired’ and importantly, it would offer democracy, a freedom of choice. Others, in an articulated expression of the linear nature of Levi-Strauss’s ‘hot’ society argued that “history remains, times do change.”
The local argument mounted against McDonald’s reiterated similar arguments to those made famous in the pamphlet that acted as a catalyst for the British ‘McLibel’ trial. While McDonald’s is read as a sign of a global order and a homogeniser of culture, the global similarity of the anti-McDonald’s protest provides witness that the protest movement suffers a parallel fate. In a mirror image of Ritzer’s conceptual McDonaldised islands, the anti-McDonald’s protestors can be read as ‘idealistic’, linked ‘islands’, using the internet as a tool of communication to foster alternative chains of relationships between globally dispersed ‘islands’ or protest groups.

The anti-McDonald’s campaign constructed McDonald’s as disorder, a perceived threat that would overturn the existing culture and herald an undesirable cultural transformation for the upper Mountains. To it, the perceived threat of McDonald’s as disorder needed annihilation. On both occasions, a loose-knit protest group was formed to coordinate the anti-McDonald’s campaigns. Comprising a diverse group of local community members, most with backgrounds that included previous community-based activism, it sought to empower and generate grassroots, ‘bottom-up’ public campaigns that would pressure the local council to reject the restaurant’s development applications. The group’s diverse background of activism ranged from the radical to the more conservative, where past causes in most cases had involved the challenge against the existing dominant order, rather than a promotion of ideals.

In both campaigns McDonald’s was portrayed using the now-standardised binary negative signs: cultural imperialism of Americanism, eco-vandals, (particularly in relationship to the centrality of meat in the restaurant’s menu), the purveyor of ‘junk food’ and the exploiters of workers with lowpaid and boring jobs. The strength of the local crusade was, however, tempered by the protest organisers’ knowledge and fear of the potency of reaction that McDonald’s had shown towards protestors in its dealings with the two British protestors in the ‘McLibel’ lawsuit. The anti-McDonald’s appeal to the public was couched in terms that stated that any right-thinking people would rationally reject McDonald’s, based on what the protestors perceived and said that McDonald’s represented.

The pro-McDonald’s public response was not openly orchestrated but apparently left to enraged individuals who felt passionate enough to write to the local ‘Letters to the
Editor’. Although, given the tactics deployed by McDonald’s in the ‘McLibel’ case and Ritzer’s argument (2003a, p. 132) of the vested interests maintaining McDonaldised setting as ‘dead’ as possible it would be reasonable to raise doubts that there was no corporate involvement. This aside, letters to the editor of the Blue Mountains Gazette ensued, using a predictable format: firstly, to demonise the anti-McDonald’s supporters. The protestors were described in ‘low’ terms, ‘a bunch of unemployed ratbags; unwashed loony left anti-everything pack of whingers’.

Secondly, there was the development of an opposing but rational argument, which focused on the list of perceived benefits that a McDonald’s could bring. An important part of the pro-McDonald’s argument was that eating at McDonald’s would be an expression of an individual’s democratic choice, allowing locals and tourist alike to have and express the freedom of choice. The hegemony of this democracy was left unspoken. The demonising of protestors was enforced by a constant rhetorical question: where were the anti-McDonald’s campaigners in terms of other similar related local issues? Here the unasked question was always ‘Why are you particularly anti-McDonald’s?’

This question highlights the power of McDonald’s as a sign. In this instance, McDonald’s was viewed as representing the possibility of two different futures. By declaration of a position in relationship to the proposed restaurant, individuals were making a value statement reflecting Brillat-Savarin’s aphorisms two, three and four: a public statement of their values and their desired local and, by extension, future world. The anti-McDonald’s stance can be understood as an expression of Bakhtin’s (1984) and Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of food as a means of displaying defiant opposition to the dominant culture. The resistance to McDonald’s had become a collective unifying expression, for a set of diverse protestors who had some sense of being the ‘other’. While externally classified into one categorisation, however, the protest group recognised the different and competing ideologies of individuals within their group, and the complexity of mapping their boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The complexity of the protest group is useful in highlighting the complex meta-symbolism of the sign McDonald’s.

This acknowledgment of different values within the group provided an ongoing source of tension and mistrust for the coalition of protestors. While this situation
provided the protestors with their own source of entropy, it reflected one accepted reason for the polarised views within the community over McDonald’s; that is, that it was based upon class differences and competing value systems. For example, the pro-McDonald’s statements largely expressed a bourgeois sentiment and the imposition of hierarchies that favoured these goals--witnessed in the moral demonising of protestors--reinforcing differentiation, and marking a boundary of inclusion and exclusion.

The protestors were portrayed using ‘low’ terms, the opposites of terms that the bourgeoisie use to characterise themselves. The pro-McDonald’s supporter is in turn characterised by the protestors as unthinking, without the deep social conscience of the protestors. The use of this charge--of being unthinking--draws on the historical notion that it is only from the protestors’ self-declared liminal position, situated on the edge of the prevailing order and embracing disorder, that true understanding of order can be reached. The examination of society cannot be undertaken from within, subject to the force of hegemony, but must happen from the edges or through ritual inversion, as a means of holding up some form of ‘mirror’ to examine itself.

Here we see a demonstration of the creation of order, using a clearly understood message constructed from existing signs and hierarchies to denote the winners and losers; and yet it generates an open text. The concept of who wins and who loses is of course dependent on the initial position taken and, while the hierarchy is expressed in static bipolar terms, it remains fluid, filled with subtlety and nuance. The protestors’ victory in keeping McDonald’s out of the upper Blue Mountains is one of disorder over the corporation and the order it signifies. It can also be read as McDonald’s as a sign of disorder, threatening the existing order of the upper Blue Mountains and being defeated by that order. Here McDonald’s is ambiguous, potentially a pollutant, dirt-like, something that is interpreted as being out of place in the environment of the upper Blue Mountains. Simultaneously, it is a representation of a prevailing order that is understood as the dominant social order outside this local ‘alternate’ area. For the pro-McDonald’s voice, McDonald’s represented the familiar desired sign of new order. For the anti-McDonald’s protest, the dominant ideology and its system of order was challenged by a small group of people from a liminal position; one that has held the corporation’s monopolistic intentions in check.
This case study highlights the political power of disorder and the functioning of the system of order. The Blue Mountains protest is an example of a largely symbolic challenge to the wider social order represented by McDonald’s. This use of McDonald’s as a ritual object draws upon Lévi-Strauss’s (1966b, p. 224) description of the ritual substitution of an everyday ‘low’ item, such as a food, as the real target of the protest. Protestors in the Blue Mountains cannot realistically attack the USA or modernity and overthrow the hegemony, but they can challenge the symbol and hope to generate favourable change while maintaining a continuity of order. This strategy reflects the carnival tradition of temporarily embracing disorder, ‘turning the world upside down,’ as a political strategy by a subordinate group within a society, in a bottom-up challenge to try and reshape order.

Conclusion

Politically, McDonald’s is an ambiguous sign, a representative of the dialectic between order and disorder. As the history of the corporation illustrates, McDonald’s has grown from being a product of a new social order, a consequence of its environment, to become, using Ritzer’s label, the symbol of that order. Market success has delivered McDonald’s political power. This political power is reinforced by corporate image-making which seeks to link McDonald’s with other existing symbols that express desired sets of values. This economic success and alignment, particularly with the values expressed by brand ‘America’, highlights and helps strengthen McDonald’s dominant and increasingly monopolistic position in the hegemony, allowing the corporate pursuit of the creation of order. Ritzer’s McDonaldisation thesis maps this order creation from restaurant through the wider social sphere. Initially constructed from a perspective that focused only upon the rationalisation of order, the Ritzer thesis has developed to accommodate a recognition of the dialectic.

Ritzer’s (2003a) metaphor of “Islands of the Living Dead” provides an insightful construct, highlighting the application of Finkelstein’s ‘top-down’ restaurant-structured ‘incivility’ as projected more broadly onto living life in general. This McDonaldised mode of order, initially viewed as deadening and ‘cage’ like, the antithesis of the examined existence, is reliant on principles derived from ‘bread and
circuses’ for its appeal. Subservience to the status quo is the price to be paid, in exchange for social and economic safety provided by the owners of McDonaldisation. This control is supplemented by the provision of a carnivalised spectacle of non-stop entertainment.

However, order can only be constructed with reference to disorder and while the ‘Islands’ may have deadened life, they cannot remove the presence of disorder which remains an inherent construct, as Ritzer’s thesis helps illustrate. Disorder, while a challenge to order, is a vital force in driving change in a ‘hot’ society along the trajectory of the ‘civilising process’.

The success of McDonald’s must generate a hierarchical differential that also produces disorder, and which will seek to hold order to account. This process can be witnessed in the cited example of the anti-McDonald’s protest, the campaigns to keep McDonald’s out of the upper Blue Mountains. McDonald’s may profit from significant ordering power but, as Elias has noted, this dominant position also generates an opposition. This opposition is, in a display of the functioning of the order/disorder dialectic, directed at the corporation itself and at McDonald’s, the meta-symbol and sign of ritual substitution.

In the persona of a neo-colonial power, McDonald’s has been interpreted as a form of ‘disorder’, not only challenging the existing hegemony but also acting as a catalyst for reflection. As ‘disorder’, McDonald’s can become a vehicle for an examined existence by facilitating the questioning of the existing social order. Just as Rabelais used carnivalesque imagery of food in his ‘War of the Sausages,’ questioning his society, so too has the McDonald’s hamburger been used to examine how we live in the late twentieth century.

Disillusioned with McDonald’s as a symbol of modernity in 1986, Italian anti-McDonald’s protestors began a gastronomic protest movement. Taking as ideals the binary opposite values of those expressed by the concept of ‘fast food’ and the sign of McDonald’s, the ‘slow food’ protest was one that pitted Old World, high/bourgeois culture, political left, and a gastronomic elite against the ascendency of New World American values of modernity, and the popularity of this world’s
perceived low/mass culture food. This protest developed however, in a manner unlike the protests of McLibel and the Mountains against McDonald’s; it did not remain simply as a form of disorderly resistance to the order of McDonald’s. The disorder of McDonald’s had catalysed a new form of order into existence, a gastronomic order and the binary opposite to McDonald’s. The Slow Food movement was born.
Chapter 9--The Double Face of Resistance

The ambiguity and complexity of McDonald’s as one of the most powerful food signs of the late twentieth century can only be understood by reference to the order/disorder dialectic. This thesis has positioned McDonald’s at the intersection of two versions of history; in each the order/disorder dialectic was shown to play a different historical role. These juxtaposed histories have allowed McDonald’s to be read in the fashion of the bricoleur, interpreted according to the reader’s position. For example, Ritzer (1993, 1998) argued that McDonald’s is a sign of order; here McDonald’s can be understood as a representative of slow triumph of the bourgeoisie, the top-down order expressed by Elias (1994). As a foil to this understanding, McDonald’s can also be seen to embrace the ‘low’ of the carnivalesque (Boje and Cai, 2004); here McDonald’s can be understood as a representative of the bottom-up ‘disorder’ of folk culture as expressed by Bakhtin (1984).

McDonald’s drawing on the tradition of food symbolism and its dominant position in the marketplace, have made the corporation a symbolically powerful sign of a particular form of order. This situation of market dominance, as Elias (1994) notes, with any increasingly monopolistic position or because of the differential that exists, as Lévi- Strauss (1966b) argues in relationship to ‘hot’ societies, produces entropy as a reaction to this order. McDonald’s, because of its market and prominent symbolic value, must attract criticism; its dominant position as a sign of order must produce its disorder. These criticisms vary in scale and intensity. They can be locally focused, as witnessed in the protest ‘Mountains against McDonald’s’ or global, as in the coverage accorded the McLibel trial. One protest however is of particular interest not merely because it draws upon both key moments of food history outlined by this thesis to mount its challenge to McDonald’s, the gastronomic tradition of Brillat-Savarin and the writing of Rabelais. This protest action is different because it has transcended the concept of simple objection levelled against McDonald’s and developed into its own form of order that mirrors McDonald’s.
Occupying the same intersection as the two versions of histories and the late twentieth century interface between the order of modernity and the ‘disorder’ of postmodernity as McDonald’s, is the anti-McDonald’s gastronomic movement, Slow Food. Started in direct opposition to a McDonald’s, Slow Food creates a gastronomic binary with McDonald’s. By examining the evolution of Slow Food in the context of this constant and consistent binary relationship, further insight into the complexity of the sign of McDonald’s, and into the workings of the order/disorder dialectic is provided. Slow Food supplements our understanding of McDonald’s not by offering a simple contrasting narrative, but (as with the complex tales of Rabelais) by way of a complex interwoven narrative of the dialectic between order and disorder and the duality of order. Both Slow Food and McDonald’s, as important late twentieth-century food signs, play a different but juxtaposed role. By meditating on Slow Food, the complexity of meanings of McDonald’s is further revealed.

**Slow Food--a gastronomic movement born of the order and disorder dialectic**

Today a global movement, Slow Food has taken up the gastronomic evangelical role once occupied by Brillat-Savarin. Slow Food (2004) is, according to its own manifesto, now an international movement for the defence of and the right to pleasure, a movement that stands for the protection of the ‘right to taste’. Claiming over 80,000 members spread across 100 countries and almost 800 convivia worldwide, the international movement was founded in Paris in 1989--both the time and place chosen for their historical gastronomic symbolism. Slow Food’s formal establishment was designed as a tribute to the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution and the extinction of the jobs of French Court chefs--which led in turn, as is often erroneously credited, to the subsequent creation of the restaurant. This historical food link also serves to connect the notions of prevailing order formally at these two interfaces of history: the ‘hot’ society order encapsulated by Brillat-Savarin and McDonald’s as a sign for the late twentieth century.

Slow Food is a movement born of the dialectic between order and disorder. The beginning of Slow Food serves to illustrate Elias’s argument in relationship to the neutralising of monopolies, and Lévi-Strauss’s generation of disorder in a ‘hot’ society. The media generally credits the genesis of the movement to events in 1986,
when the first Italian McDonald’s opened in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. Incensed by this act, interpreted as an arrogant insertion of American culture into a site of important Italian historical significance, a politically-left broadcaster from the Piedmont region of Italy, Carlo Petrini, organised a political protest. Sitting down in collaborative effort with “a group of left public intellectuals, including writers, journalists, singer-songwriters” (Leitch, 2003, p. 459), Petrini wrote the ‘Slow Food Manifesto’, a document that sought to provide the foundation philosophy for a social movement.

From a structuralist perspective, this Manifesto clearly articulated food as a surface representation of the deeper-held values of the author. The manifesto spoke out against not only the hamburger restaurant chain McDonald’s, more importantly the manifesto denounced McDonald’s fast-food as a symbolic sign of the hectic-paced lifestyle believed had regrettably become dominant in our modern industrial society. The format of the manifesto document, by denouncing McDonald’s and proclaiming the philosophy of the Slow Food movement, can be understood to use binary and socially hierarchal relationship principles. The desired values are derived by expressing the polar opposites of those associated with the denounced fast-food. This binary construct is clearly witnessed in the name Slow Food, or the symbolic gesture of selecting the slow-moving snail as the movement’s logo, an articulation of the contempt for fast-food and an accelerated lifestyle. Petrini explains this deliberate choice of logo, his words providing significant insight into the movement’s philosophy: “the snail is a food but, more importantly, it can be found everywhere and it carries its home on its back. According to Petrini, the snail captures the ideals of the Slow Food movement as being about food and connection to place, as well as cosmopolitanism” (Leitch, 2003, p. 459).

The cosmopolitanism of the snail can also be seen to symbolise the history and transformation of Slow Food from a local protest to a global movement, and its subsequent distancing from the movement’s early anti-McDonald’s stance. Petrini’s book Slow Food: the case for taste (2001) has been translated for and published in America, highlighting just how far the movement has repositioned itself from one of a disordered protest towards acceptance in the once-criticised hegemonic order. Alice Waters, who wrote the book’s forward, opened by recounting the McDonald’s story;
Petrini briefly mentions the protest but, interestingly, the chronology of the movement printed at the back of the book makes no mention of the incident. This attempted negation of its history serves to illustrate the process of incorporation of disorder into the acceptable order, but leaves exposed the continued liminality of gastronomy.

What Slow Food now proposes and offers as an augmentation to its protest movement against McDonald’s is a broader gastronomic ‘lifestyles’ approach (the concept of a moral ‘eating a better world’). Slow Food has become an agency focused upon the slower sensual pleasures of table and a care for the environment. The rallying cry is one that proclaims the movement as ‘eco-gastronomes’ who wish to “strike the right balance of respect and exchange with nature and the environment.” The movement argues that “The fact is that our pleasure cannot be disconnected from the pleasure of others, but it is likewise connected to the equilibrium we manage to preserve (and in many cases revive) with the environment we live in” (Slowfood, 2004).

Here, Slow Food moves the recipient field of the public good of gastronomy from the ‘economy’, as bequeathed by Brillat-Savarin, to the ‘environment’. This notion of ‘eco-gastronomy’ provides not only a useful moral differentiation from Slow Food’s genesis as anti-McDonald’s protest, but is simultaneously used to distance it from the morally ambiguous perception of ‘traditional’ gastronomy. This actual distancing from the traditions of gastronomy is difficult to appreciate if solely defined by the stated morality of a care for the environment. Brillat-Savarin’s definition of gastronomy, as interpreted by Santich (1996, pp. 172-81), certainly embraces a similar environmental awareness—particularly if read against the mores of the day, such as the religious belief of man’s legitimised dominance over nature, contemporary food production practices, and levels of environmental degradation.

The meanings generated out of linking the signs of ‘eco’ and ‘gastronomy’ as a projection of a coherent sense of order is more critical for Slow Food than they would have been for Brillat-Savarin, in terms of the political positioning of gastronomy. Tracking this building of a desired and coherent sense of order of Slow Food provides insight not only into Slow Food, but also into its relationship to
McDonald’s. This order building, and political positioning is evident in the description of the corporate structure, organisational initiatives and the playing-down of the powerful leadership role taken by Petrini (compare this to McDonald’s use of Ray Kroc as part of its corporate myth-building). Slow Food proudly self-proclaims the democracy of the organisational structure, which mirrors that of Elias’s (1994) nation state (here also the similarity to McDonald’s franchise structure remains evident):

Slow Food’s main offices situated in Bra (Cuneao), a small town in southern Piedmont, employ about 100 people. They are the hub of a close-knit network of local grassroots offices in Italy and abroad, the so-called convivia, which promote the movement by staging events, debates and other initiatives. Thanks to the hard work and enthusiasm of their managers, collaborators and members, they provide continuous feedback to the central offices in Bra (Slowfood, 2004).

This creation of order, particularly the use of terms such as ‘hard work’, appeals to a bourgeois set of values as identified by Elias (1994, pp. 124-5); however, this also highlights an ambiguity of order that continually challenges Slow Food as well as Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy: how to encapsulate the notion of ‘moderation’. An example is Slow’s need to address the philosophical difference between being ‘slow’, rather than lazy. This ambiguity also manifests again in the tension between Slow’s legacy as a protest movement, disorder, and the function of Slow as a business, or order, operating as part of the status quo.

The changing nature of Slow Food grew out of its particular mixture of politics and business. As the movement’s focus moved from being an anti-McDonald’s protest to one that highlighted gastronomic alternatives, Slow Food began to position itself to “disseminate information about local food cultures and the challenges they face. In so doing, it effectively became a ‘clearing house’ for knowledge of local foods, initially in Italy, but latterly more globally” (Miele and Murdoch, 2003, p. 33). The centrality of commerce and publishing to gastronomy remains clearly articulated in the business initiatives of Slow Food. This includes running a publishing house, which specialises in tourism, food and wine. “Its catalogue now contains about 40 titles and it also publishes Slow, ‘a herald of taste and culture’, in five languages:
Italian, English, French, German and Spanish.” Other initiatives such as the Ark of Taste or Presidia clearly illustrate the trajectory of Slow Food.

The Ark of Taste is positioned as an effort to revive endangered gastronomic biodiversity. The project has as its stated aim the identification and cataloguing of products, dishes and animals that are in danger of disappearing. The offered reasoning is the belief that any traditional product will encapsulate the flavours of its region of origin, not to mention local customs and ancient production techniques. With this in mind, Slow Food is also working on an offshoot project, Presidia, to aid, in the protection of the historic, artistic and environmental heritage of places of gastronomic pleasure (cafés, inns, bistros), and to safeguard the food and agricultural heritage (crop biodiversity, artisanal techniques, sustainable agriculture, rural development, food traditions). In 2000, to spotlight these objectives, the International Slow Food Awards were instigated to reward, showcase and thank those working within the Slow philosophy.

A third initiative of Slow Food would no doubt delight Brillat-Savarin by fulfilling one of his dreams: the creation of the University of Gastronomic Sciences, Università di Scienze Gastronomiche. The University’s articulated aim is to conduct courses at a range of levels across a broad spectrum of food-related sciences; underpinned by education in the ‘gastronomic’. Scientific learning is supplemented with a deep understanding of the pleasure of taste, history and the cultural elements of food. Here the recognition of the ongoing tension between science and ‘folk knowledge’ is a key to understanding the philosophy of Slow, and the philosophic difference in its gastronomy to that of the gastronomy proposed by Brillat-Savarin.

The civilizing process – the rise of middle-class values in the form of American order at the cost of European order

The catalyst for Slow Food would seem contradictory to the values and ideals expressed by Brillat-Savarin. How could a new gastronomic movement have its genesis in the protesting of a restaurant opening, even a McDonald’s restaurant? Where is the celebration of the new or the special praise that Brillat-Savarin had suggested be offered to restaurateurs who seek to cater to those large numbers with
modest incomes? The answer is embedded not in McDonald’s as a restaurant, but in McDonald’s as a sign—a symbol that to Petrini and his followers represented a dramatic change in social order.

An essential component of gastronomy is the creation of a particular view of order, by recognition of differences and the creation of hierarchies based on these distinctions. In many ways, McDonald’s represents the polar opposite of what Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy had come to represent, or was perceived to represent. McDonald’s represents a triumph of a New World order over the Old World, the industrial over the artisanal, global over local, popularist over ‘high’ culture, secular over religious. Its dining did not allow the same opportunities to exhibit cultural capital and it stands accused of selling food that contributes to obesity, a condition which Brillat-Savarin considered anathema. The McDonald’s restaurant experience symbolically redefined eating out and for Petrini and his followers represented a shift in how people were living. Could they see a warning as offered in Brillat-Savarin’s third aphorism: “the fate of nations depends on the way they eat”? For Petrini and his followers, McDonald’s is a symbolic shift away from the ideals they value, their established sense of order. McDonald’s provides a sign of what they regard as a negative commentary on the modern world, or at least popular Western culture. The McDonald’s hamburger is symbolically charged, a focal political symbol of the economic and social change that is sweeping through Europe.

Traditionally, Europe—and particularly France—has viewed itself as possessing a hegemonic culinary superiority. European ideals and traditions have provided the structure and order associated with eating in the Western world—not only in Europe, but also in the New World, thanks to exploration and colonisation. We see the pervasiveness and strength of this order in our recognition of Rabelais’ food scenes, 400 years on; these can still be read and understood from within a range of different cultures. This is a direct function of the stability and diffusion of the understanding and dominance of European eating habits. Just as Rabelais was able to use symbolic culinary language to explore contemporary affairs, so Slow Food has read the opening of McDonald’s in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome as commentary. In this McDonald’s opening lies a symbolic representation of the inversion of the traditional
hegemonic order of the world. The Old World of Europe has been supplanted by the rise of the New World power, America.

The imposition of New World values on a significant site of Old World culture highlights this hegemonic shift. The old order has been overturned and is confronted by the disordering influence of a new set of values. The values of first Italy, then Europe, are seen to be under attack from what Ritzer (1993) labelled ‘McDonaldisation’. Petrini’s view was that the gastronomic landscape of Europe was having change ‘forced’ upon it by a company that imposes not just a restaurant but also a cultural system of operating. The protest was aimed not at one restaurant but at the global spread of Americanisation, both economically and culturally. The strength of Petrini’s outrage can be read in the method of opposition, the release of a manifesto. This act can be interpreted as a Marxist act, politically left, even communist, and therefore particularly anti-American. The protest is overtly nationalistic, using food as a signifier of sides and is reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss’s comparison of French and English cuisine. For the Italian Petrini, his tradition, values and national pride are tied to a diverse gastronomic landscape of regional cuisines, traditional farming, artisanal food production, small family restaurants, inns and bistros. This was perceived to be threatened by domination from a new order signified by an American mass-marketeted, highly industrialised, multinational food giant.

Slow Food’s response was to appeal to a particularly traditional sense of order and contrast this, in binary terms, with the new Americanised offering: “Let us rediscover the flavours and savours of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of fast food. In the name of productivity, the Fast Life has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes” (Slowfood, 2004). The contrast between the two systems of order uses restaurants as signs. Miele and Murdoch (2003, pp. 32-3) describe the founder’s concerns: that the traditional social chain of relationships between the local osterie and trattorie and the local food production system would be broken. The campaign for the right to taste was aimed at maintaining order, by preserving the status quo in the form of the traditional local food system. This was to be achieved by disseminating information about the
‘material culture’ of culinary commodities, a sense that the product is embedded and reflects its place of origin.

**Slow Food—a European construct of order**

The initial focus of Slow Food was very much a local protest focused on one piazza in Italy and opposition to a multinational company. From this beginning Slow Food has grown, transforming itself into a global culinary business that acts as a moral and political advocate for its own gastronomic construct of order. Slow Food’s effort to create a new, better world finds inspiration in the European literature of the past, a manifestation of the coherent construction of order in opposition to the new order represented by Americanisation:

From the many paradises produced by European culture to make readers and dreamers happy, we have selected one in which food and wine plays a major role: Gargantua by François Rabelais.

Chapter 57 is particularly significant as far as we are concerned: it is devoted to Thélème Abbey, and the bizarre order of monks and nuns that lived together in that garden of delight: “They got up whenever they wanted, they drank, worked and slept whenever they felt like it”. Which meant precisely relaxation and rest, drinking well and eating better in complete freedom and respect for each. They were inspired by a single motto, “do what you like”; yet they knew no discord or anarchy.

Slow Food is the ground on which not one but hundreds of Thélème Abbeys may rise, a terrain whose one essential life-blood is the freedom that nurtures all its members. Nothing is more relaxing and pleasant than fantasizing about a better world, clearly outlining its customs and enjoying a feeling of togetherness, whether drinking or playing, relaxing or reading. But to make this possible, a certain degree of detachment is required, a moment of calm, better use of idle time...even a bed in which to dream before arising and reaching out to other people (Slowfood, 2004).

The cited chapter of Rabelais provides another link between the thesis’s three key historical food moments, and provides insight into the ideology of Slow Food--
although this is touched by an expression of gastronomic irony: Bakhtin (1984, p. 280) noted that the Abbey does not possess a kitchen. Decoding Rabelais, the episode demonstrates a belief that Slow seeks to stand at the periphery, at the normal boundaries of society. The freedom to choose and live life as one sees fit is centrally important; this is to be free from the fear of subjugation from hegemonic forces. It is vital to be freed from the obligation to bow to rules and regulations that provide a restricted and reduced life. This state is achieved by protection from what is harmful in society; this, in turn, allows a necessary contemplative detachment. In effect, Slow Food must be marginalising, its position made liminal, one of entropy in a ‘hot’ society. This position expresses the order/disorder dialectic that gives Slow Food its meaning and allows it to be a catalyst for change. It is from this position that the possibility of its vision of a bourgeois utopia can realised. This will be a utopia populated by beautiful people, in the platonic sense--those individuals who encapsulate goodness and personify nobility. These will not be ordinary people, but will be born well and capable of the correct use of a moral intellect. Their pleasure is not an individual hedonism but one shared democratically amongst like-minded individuals. They are not radical, but conservative conformists who believe that they have a higher moral code.

This positioning of the message of Slow Food as representative of a higher moral code is, however, presented in a manner that has mass-market appeal. This restates the inherent tension of inclusion and the charges of elitism that bedevil gastronomy. The founding arguments for Slow Food are delivered in the format of the classic manifesto, rather than in a long and complex critique of the debate. Written from a position that appropriates the category of moral superiority, the debate is reduced to simplistic expressions of binary opposites that take their reference from what is opposed: fast-food bad, Slow Food good; industrialised food bad, artisanal food good; and modern bad, traditional good. In the manifesto format the underlying debate of the politics and complexities of the modern industrial food system is reduced to sets of simplistic opposites in a manner, that seeks largely to remove the need for the modern gastronome to engage in the reasoned understanding advocated by Brillat-Savarin. The duality of order inherent in gastronomy is veiled in the message and the use of the mass media to announce Slow Food’s position. Expressing the similarities that sustain the binary relationship between them, in a
number of ways Slow Food has come to resemble the very organisation against which it initially stood. Its message is delivered in a fashion that gives little credit to ordinary individuals: to be able to act conscientiously, or without a clearly defined and prescribed moral framework. In the background, shaping the message is the authoritarian voice of Brillat-Savarin’s ‘Professor’ still heard offering his rules for desired forms of eating.

**Middle-class values – genteel anarchy**

The articulated Slow Food message, while utopian and revolutionary, retains the gastronomic tradition of table talk and refrains from being overly controversial. Centrally, Slow Food is still heavily involved in the political struggle to create its version of a gastronomic Utopia. For many of the members of a local convivium, however, Slow Food may represent little more than an exercise in conspicuous consumption, a chance to purchase membership into an organisation that offers a level of social capital different to the prevailing values of economic capital, and the right to participate in the convivial activities of a dining club. Slow Food offers a source of inclusion to its largely middle-class membership at a time when membership in other cultural collectives is on the wane. Here the act of joining a convivium can be read against Brillat-Savarin’s fourth aphorism, as a symbolic demonstration of resistance against the largely individualistic nature of modern society bestowing members with the additional sense of identity as members of a new moral consumer consciousness. The reality mirrors the subservience to the centrally constructed hegemony that Elias (1994) observed in relationship to the operation of the nation state.

The publishing arm of Slow Food has supported this focus, with the major thrust of its publishing being a range of value-laden consumer-orientated guides promoting traditional food products and their localities, rather than texts that seek to stimulate a deeper understanding of global food politics. The guides help produce the sense of order that Slow Food views as desirable by creating their own system of classifications. Foods and localities are marked as either desirable, and thus included, or excluded, marking them as undesirable. Those foods and localities included are then ranked into hierarchies of desired qualities. The guide’s ranking lists assume the
qualities of ‘truth’, reinforcing and helping to replicate the desired Slow Food order. The inherent ambiguity between commercial activity and moral leadership is apparent with Slow Food’s recognition of its position and the potential threat to its credibility. This recognition is encapsulated in the following statement made in relationship to one of their guides, Vini d’Italia: “the guide should not be seen as a mere marketing venture, an attempt to fill a publishing niche” (Petrini, 2001, p. 46). Slow Food’s position here is analogous to that outlined by Finkelstein in relationship to order creation in restaurants, where ‘incivility’ is structured into diners’ behaviour.

The ambiguity expressed and acknowledged by Slow Food in relationship to its commercial activities is at the core of its existence as a social movement. Slow Food highlights the ambiguous relationship that people have had with modernity, especially the love-hate relationship with the world of commerce. Slow Food is informed by traditional gastronomic values and is thus not anti-commerce, but critical of the current dominant system of commerce expressed by the sign of McDonald’s. Slow seeks to replace this system with one that is constructed on its own values and system of order: “produce less and improve quality; consume less and pay a fair price for quality” (Petrini, 2001, p. 42). By taking a stance of disorder, one of being marginal to the accepted order, Slow Food has managed to take a symbolic role reminiscent of Baudelaire’s flâneur. It has sought to become a social conscience, holding a mirror up to the existing order and then asking people to look carefully at the reflection. It poses the question: is this reflection the entity they actually desire?

By choice Slow Food and the flâneur both strive to march at a slower pace, in a defiant challenge to the ordering property of linear time and, by extension, the hegemonic order. The snail and the tortoise, they are slightly out of step with their surrounding society but still very much a part of their community. The flâneur is like the Slow Snail: quintessentially cosmopolitan, at home everywhere, and yet restless, dissatisfied. Finding energy in the crowd, the flâneur is spurred on, a passionate lover of life but experiencing the malaise of modernity, disappointed with being. He searches for a special ‘something’ that is perceived to be lacking in modernity. The flâneur, like Slow Food, operates as an object of disorder that understands that its function is as a moral force that must work to re-pattern the existing order of society.
This example is evidence of the regenerative force of disorder in the order/disorder dialectic.

**Globalised order**

To help achieve its desired gastronomic order, Slow Food has followed McDonald’s’ lead and exported its belief system globally. Slow Food, as McDonald’s, can only be successful as an organisation if its internal values system is acculturated into the host community’s wider cultural framework. For both organisations the promotion of their underlying value system is crucial.

Miele and Murdoch (2003, pp. 36-8) provide an analysis that compares and contrasts the two opposed routes to global acceptance. This analysis also provides a representation of the values of Miele and Murdoch, who construct a social hierarchy between McDonald’s and Slow Food. McDonald’s’ strategy is described as aimed at the masses, to which it transplanted its operating system and values while trimming the product to meet local requirements. This is accompanied by a process of ‘insiderisation’, where McDonald’s works at becoming embedded in local markets, eventually accepted as local. “However, this ‘insider’ strategy can only go so far: McDonald’s still exists to disseminate standardized products and practices. Thus, this ‘insider’ strategy might be termed ‘faking localness’” (Miele and Murdoch, 2003, p. 37).

Alternatively, Slow Food is presented as operating in a more virtuous manner aimed at a more elite market, the discerning middle or upper-class consumer, by exporting the local globally. Like the symbolism of its logo, the snail, Slow Food seeks to be at home anywhere in the world. The middle-class morality inherent in gastronomy becomes, within Petrini’s ideology, a “virtuous globalization” (Leitch, 2003, p. 455) where artisanal food producers can export and sell their products globally. In a contra flow, gastronomic tourism is also seen as a means to capitalise on the publicising of cultural differences by encouraging the consumer to visit the product. By combining, at the grassroots level, a wide range of local products and cultures, Slow Food has manufactured a sense of the local. This stands largely in contrast to the McDonald’s approach, one of local replication of the global form. “The two networks thus
combine the local and the global in two very different ways: one attempts to make the local a mirror of the global (when you stand in one McDonald’s, in a sense, you stand in them all); the other seeks to sweep up multiple localities into a loosely constructed globality” (Miele and Murdoch, 2003, p. 38).

While contrasted as different, the Slow Food approach embraces some elements of the McDonald’s technique. Petrini’s (2001) *Slow Food: the case for taste* provides a clear indicator that Slow Food can be seen--particularly in the case of the USA--to be trimming its product to suit the local market. As Slow Food increasingly moves outside Europe, its discourse actively embraces a more neutral global tone. Sonnnefeld (in Petrini, 2001, p. xiv), writing to introduce Slow Food for the American audience, suggests that the strategic challenge for Slow Food is the delatinisation of the movement. This homogenising is also evident in Slow Food’s promotion of distinct local products. Through documentation and subsequent publication, a process of codifying is initiated, where the non-standard becomes subject to order and thus becomes a standardised product--a scenario that replicates the state of McDonald’s products.

When comparisons are made between Slow Food and ‘fast-food’, the differences represent complex philosophical difference but may be expressed in terms of simple binary opposites. In the same manner that Lévi-Strauss (1972) provided a critical analysis of French and English cuisine, using a structure of opposition and correlation to mark out the character of each cuisine, the same results are witnessed here. Mennell’s (1985, p. 8) criticism of Lévi-Strauss’s approach also needs to be remembered; he argued that Lévi-Strauss was simply giving a sophisticated vocabulary to the traditional Frenchman’s view of English food. This mode of nationalistic debate is important to understanding Slow Food.

To maintain itself, gastronomy is reliant on the creation and comprehension of a system of social hierarchies. Without differentiation there can be no thought of discrimination. Slow Food’s promotion of local food over global food as a core value creates a necessary and simple hierarchal binary. In turn, using the coherent and consistent nature of order, this helps preference other elements, such as European over American or, more correctly, Old World Europe over New World multinational.
The promotion of local foods and cuisines helps to create a sense of identity in a world increasingly perceived as a homogenised global society, dominated by corporations. Identity defined by connection to place creates a sense of nationalistic nostalgia for a time when ‘cultural’ was tied to a definable geographical place.

Here food has been tapped as a powerful signifier of identity by the Slow Food movement, to alleviate the sense of alienation experienced within modernity. Replacing alienation is the experience of a sense of belonging to place and being intimately part of a tradition. Through the convivia, Slow Food has sought to provide a means of experiencing a sense of inclusion to a seemingly more authentic social form of lifestyle; here the long chains of relationships that support global networks are not shortened but given a sense of intimacy. The concept of Slowness, particularly its embrace of ‘gastronomic time’, actively challenges the compression of time and space that is a feature of modernity. Through its activities, Slow Food has moved itself from a position of disorder, where it questioned the status quo of post-industrial modernity, to a position as the dominant global gastronomic force. From this dominant position, Slow Food is seeking to use its hegemonic power to create a new sense of order in opposition to the perceived McDonaldisation of society. This is to be achieved through its own commoditisation of a specific cultural identity. In effect, Slow Food is setting up its own version of Ritzer’s (2003a) ‘Islands of Living Dead’, ‘Islands’ of (de)McDonaldisation.

Looking to the past

The manner in which the binary construct of order that defines Slow Food leads to an anti-American reading can also be used to examine and question European values, particularly those of the new Europe of the European Union. Slow Food ideals are not sited in the order of New Europe but, symbolically, in the past of Rabelais’ expression of the utopian dream of Thélème Abbey. From this position the values of New Europe can thus be questioned:

For Petrini, the questions are: Will the new Europe be a ‘fast’ Europe that protects the interests of fast capitalism, corporate control of food production and indiscriminate introduction of genetically modified crops? Or can the new Europe be
a ‘slow’ Europe that protects small artisanal food producers and the cultural
landscapes to which they are attached? What kind of political vision of Europe will
prevail? Will it be a Europe committed to neo-liberal models of economic
rationality? Or will it be a democratic Europe fostering cultural diversity and

This link between science and the order of New Europe has forced the inversion of
values, but not changed the binary relationship expressed by Brillat-Savarin’s tenet
of science as the future of gastronomy. For Petrini, the future of gastronomy, in its
positive role as a force of disorder, is located in the memories of the past. The
longing for nostalgic food products with the leisure practices of history can be sought
out to act as a foil to the ills of modern society. The smallness of a localised past
becomes a safe refuge from the speed and direction of change offered by the current
globalised hegemony. Within this sanctuary, food offers a direct and symbolic
connection to the local landscape and to the work of an individual. Nostalgia offers a
site for the Rabelaisian Thélème utopia, rich in local cuisines, cultured, with a moral
economy, populated by individuals of taste who are confident in their own identity,
with time for the individual to reflect and enjoy life, not at a dictated pace, but with a
freedom and at a pace in tune with a natural rhythm of life. The Slow Food
movement, while inverting some elements of Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy, retains
gastronomy’s ‘disordered’ position in relationship to the dominant order of society. It
constructs the private enjoyment of food as a civic and moral duty, a means of
creating a desired social order. This encapsulates the concept of ‘eating a better
world’.

To achieve this aim, one that mirrors the centrally generated political goals of the
movement, Slow Food initiatives such as The Ark of Taste and the Slow Food
Award have sought to highlight local artisanal food production. In direct opposition
to the growth and widespread acceptance of the industrialised nature of McDonald’s-
style food, Slow Food has sought to invert the hierarchy and promote the traditional
and artisanal methods of work as a means of resistance. This takes advantage of the
belief Barthes (1985, p. 65) portrays as the ‘myth of artesan’: “(T)he excellence of
the tool (as opposed to the machine), the precedence which the artisanal takes over
the industrial – in short, nostalgia for the Natural.” Drawing also on a prevailing
culture of fear, food scares such as ‘mad cow disease’, environmental pollution by
the unrestrained release of genetically modified foods, the extinction of traditional
foods, as well the symbolically powerful fear of cultural contamination of food. Slow
Food has played on the anxieties of post-industrial capitalism to assert its case. By
supporting tradition and the small artisan, a resistance to the growing monopoly of
industrial food has been initiated. This can be understood as an example of entropy,
the disorder, or the ‘fuel of change’, of a ‘hot’ society. There is a questioning of the
status quo, be it the global homogenising of food tastes or the European Union
hygiene rules. Slow Food readily provides the remedy to allay fears: ‘In the past we
did not suffer from this malaise’.

By linking to the nostalgic notion of culturally ‘low’ peasant cuisines:

Petrini was rhetorically distancing his organization from the accusations of gourmet
elitism, while simultaneously challenging normalizing hierarchies of expert
scientific knowledge, including those of the European health authorities. In this kind
of strategic symbolic reversal, the food artisan is envisaged not as a backward-
thinking conservative standing in the way of progress, but rather, as a quintessential
modern subject, a holder par excellence of national heritage (Leitch, 2003, p 457).

Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy finds a modern echo in the politics of Slow Food. Both
seek to impose their moral judgement, by giving guidance, according to certain
principles on how adherence to certain foodways can provide the structure for a
better society. The difference is in the subtle emphasis, a display of the subtlety of
meaning that is created by the order/disorder dialectic. Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy
embraces a bourgeois set of values that engage order from the top-down perspective
in the manner Elias investigated, while Slow Food also embraces a bourgeois set of
values that incorporates the political values of the founders and their more
traditional, as identified by Bourdieu (1984, p. 179), bottom-up challenge to the
hegemony. This Slow Food construct allows the bourgeois fascination with the ‘low’
to be maintained, while it is simultaneously distanced from the folk/masses.
Evidence of this subtle differentiation can be drawn from the status accorded to folk
or peasant cuisine in both philosophies. As Barthes noted, Brillat-Savarin neglects
this aspect while for Slow Food, peasant cuisine and the working-class conviviality that impressed Bourdieu are central tenet of its philosophy.

**Gastronomic education – order creation or examined existence?**

To help reinforce its gastronomic message, Slow Food has followed in the wake of McDonald’s by opening its own centralised ‘food’ university. McDonald’s opened its Hamburger University in 1961 as a means of instructing licensees and, as Love (1986, p. 148) argues, helping Ray Kroc generate a quality image for McDonald’s thought the associated prestige of its own ‘university’. Slow Food (2004), opened the ‘European Academy of Taste’ or ‘Popular University of Taste’, a university centre at Pollenzo, near Bra, that will focus on the teaching of sensory education and food culture. Operating this facility is not only a major entrepreneurial activity for Slow, but also a means of disseminating the desired Slow concept of order. As an educational activity the ‘University’ symbolically reinforces the mind/body duality that is core to gastronomy, and that should be at the core of the notion of an examined existence. But this is not the acceptance and legitimation of his discipline by the academy that Brillat-Savarin desired; gastronomy remains tainted by impressions of bourgeois elitism. The quest for legitimation continues, with the Slow Food movement inverting the process and including education as part of the commodification of its philosophy. Using the term ‘university’ to describe its facility draws on the same legitimising power that Brillat-Savarin (and Kroc) sought to be granted by invoking the academy. The University of Taste is proudly promoted on the Slow Food (2004) website as a “veritable breakthrough in the field of food and wine education.” The stated purpose of the operation –“a modern university center for the training of professionals – agroindustrial company managers, presidents of consortia, journalists and so on”--provides insight into how it hopes to achieve its aims.

The stated focus on ‘training’ would suggest a focus on reproduction of order, rather than the critical questioning that is ‘education’, with its embrace of the power of disorder. This ‘training’ is targeted at those sets of individuals who are best placed to reproduce and disseminate the evangelical message of the Slow Food movement. Petrini (2001, p. 78) even seeks to distance the teaching philosophy further from that
of a traditional university: “Our courses do not mimic university lectures: instead we try to reconcile sound scientific content with accessible style of presentation capable of holding the interests of participants.” This approach embraces the “highly rationalized infotainment” that Ritzer (1998, p 155) notes characterises the McDonaldisation of education. This philosophical approach stops short of the search for meaning that is implied in the definition of gastronomy offered by Brillat-Savarin, and offers an impediment to gastronomy as a science.

The singling-out of journalists as potential students, and of “gastronomic communication” (Petrini, 2001, p. 82) as a degree specialisation, are particularly telling, offering insight into both gastronomy as a discipline and to the means of reproducing gastronomic order. Both Brillat-Savarin and Slow Food used the power of the printed word and, for Slow Food, the newer forms of media, to widen their audience beyond those who can physically share the social realm of one table. Without gastronomic literature, gastronomy could not exist. Text moves the focus from the private material consumption of an individual’s food, to a shared public engagement with a vicarious eating and cerebral deliberation of food, ordered within the class construct of literature. Brillat-Savarin’s book was important historically because it shifted the emphasis from individual, private food diner to the collective, public food reader. The consumption shifts from material consumption to a consumption of culture. Slow Food has extended this to the commodification of culture and the global mass-marketing of a consumer food-identified lifestyle culture. This reflects the wider social increase in the consumption of food as media ‘spectacle’. This vicarious consumption of food as media ‘spectacle’ is occasionally capable of transgressing the morality of moderation, attracting the morally derogatory term of ‘Gastroporn’.

Training journalists as a means of reproducing order shows that the gastronomic movement recognises that its hero should not be the chef at the stove but the food writer dutifully reproducing the sanctioned doctrine. Writing codifies, allowing the authoritarian voice a platform to disseminate its desired form of order. In Slow Food publications, such as Petrini’s (2001) book, the moral, high tone is abundantly clear: “the proper use of raw ingredients” (Petrini, 2001, p. 51), or “showing them the rudiments of a correct approach to food” (Petrini, 2001, p 74). While writing is a
powerful ordering device, the role of the journalist is in other ways ambivalent and often compromised. In a position to deliver the utopian message and the compelling need for social change, s/he is restrained by the hegemony of a medium that uses food writing as a pleasant diversion from ‘real’ news, with stories frequently generated courtesy of food/tourism industries’ own public relations machines. This serves to reflect Ritzer’s (2003a, p. 126) concern of the manufactured magnetism that reinforces the desirability of his ‘Islands’ McDonaldised settings. For most readers, a gastronomic interest in food is destined to remain a pleasant lifestyle choice, a means of articulating a desired view of the self by a mostly leisured class, rather than a deep engagement with the order/disorder dialectic or the duality of order that is at the core of an examined existence.

The disorder of gastronomy--annihilation

Slow Food’s ability to mass market the gastronomic lifestyle points to a particular epoch of a society. Clark (1975a) argues that the existence of Slow Food could only arise in a society that has begun to decline. By embracing the ideals of Slow Food, the individual is making a statement of dissatisfaction not only with industrialised food, but also with the general order of contemporary society:

In this sense gastronomy merges with Coca Cola and le fast food as manifestations of a decadent society. Those who oppose this society and its foods reverse the Lévi-Straussian circuit in order to return to des cendres au miel: that is, their goal is to move from an overcooked, over elaborate product of a literally burned out civilization back to the products of nature (Clark, 1975a, p. 201).

While supportive of Elias’s (1994) argument of limiting monopolies, Clark ignores the inherent role of a critical and disordered view present in a functioning ‘hot’ society, and the process of auto-annihilation that will seek to silence that viewpoint.

This process of auto-annihilation can be viewed in the process of Slow Food’s increasing acceptance in America, as the movement is increasingly popular, outgrowing its original contrary position. Slow Food has been gradually incorporated into the existing order and the power of its disorder has been neutralised. This
incorporation into order is part of the overall increased rationalisation of order experienced in a ‘hot’ society. This acceptance, coupled with the movement’s growth, also serves to highlight the workings of the order/disorder dialectic in a ‘hot’ society, as Slow Food generates its own degree of entropy in the form of increased scrutiny and criticism. This beginning of criticism of Slow Food marks the global success of the movement, as detractors seek to curb the growth of the gastronomic monopoly being created. The traditional food forms of moral criticisms have all been levelled at Slow Food; for example, the morality of gourmet eating has been questioned while there is still hunger in the world; it has been accused of elitism, particularly middle-class elitism (Parkins and Craig, 2006, pp. 32-6) and Eurocentric nationalism. These attempts to curb the success of Slow Food are also evidenced in Leitch’s (2003) critique of the transformation of lardo di Colonnato from an identified Slow ‘endangered food’, to a product that represented the commodification of nostalgia, a transformation that finally led traditional makers to protest against Slow Food.

The use of nostalgia by Slow has attracted the ire of the historian Rachel Laudan (2001) who, in a rigorous attack on Slow Food’s message and sense of proposed order, has labelled their dissatisfaction with the present by retreating to the past as “Culinary Luddism.” Laudan takes issue with the movement’s simplistic portrayal of the food of the past—by evocative dichotomies—as good, a product of sunny rural days of yore; and the food of the present as bad, grey and industrial. Laudan (2001, p. 36) presents the argument that “History shows… that the Luddites have things back to front.” History displays the vast improvements that have been made in the food system and how these have benefited the consumer, she argues. Improved agriculture, storage, access and manufacture, all stages represented contributions: “Culinary Modernism had provided what was wanted: food that was processed, preservable, industrial, novel, and fast, the food of the elite at a price that everyone could afford” Laudan (2001, p. 42). According to Laudan, it was not just the food itself that was subjected to mythmaking but also an array of other aspects of historical foodways.

Laudan (2001) presents an alternative dominant narrative, a ‘top-down’ history, to that of the historic ‘folk’ perspective offered by Slow Food. The concept of fast-food
is not new but has been an important means of eating for the urban dweller for millennia. Laudan (2001) contends that food in the city was generally better than what was available to those living in rural areas. Romanticising the rural ignores the economics of the food distribution system of the period. The quixotic image of the peasant also ignores the reality of class or labour systems that governed the production of food and the impact that these had on the peasant’s lifestyle. Even the image of traditional foods, Laudan argues has been altered. Many of the dishes that are revered have comparatively short histories, and some are the direct result of capitalising on the novelty of technology to drive culinary innovation. Laudan (2001, p. 42) is blunt when she asserts that “the sunlit past of the Culinary Luddites never existed. So their ethos is based not on history but on a fairy tale.”

What becomes important in Laudan’s assertion is the identification of aspects of the commodification of the Slow Food philosophy. The notion that its history is mere myth becomes unimportant. (This is reminiscent of McDonald’s own attempts at corporate myth-making.) The power lies in food as a system of communication and the strength of the message that is read, particularly in the context of postmodernism. The nostalgia for the past should be viewed as a coping strategy for dealing with the perceived ills of the present, and that is a strategy easier to implement than the hard work required to retreat to ‘high’ culture. The history does not need to be authentic; it needs to offer no more than a utopian ideal that signals some hope of change by highlighting and contrasting the everyday. Just as Carnival uses a symbolic system of opposites to create a realm that questions the everyday, so too Slow Food has created a realm that seeks to contrast and challenge the everyday.

When Slow Food began and publicity was focused on the anti-McDonald’s protest, the philosophy of Slow Food was clearly defined in terms of symbolic inversion of the values expressed by McDonald’s. The symbolic inversion of the hierarchy expressed by the use of opposites is fundamental to making sense of Slow Food’s ordering principles. The use of a nostalgic history myth by Slow Food stands in opposition to the myth offered by McDonald’s, for the promise of a better future. The elevation of the artisan stands opposed to the reverence for technology inherent in McDonald’s system. Even the use of ambiguous signifiers helps to link and contrast the two positions. The use of calculability, a cornerstone of Ritzer’s
McDonaldisation, is used to show the quality of Slow Food activities. Petrini’s (2001, p. 46) statement in regard to the publication Vini d’Italia is a splendid example of this use of calculability: Vini d’Italia has “gone from an initial print run of 5,000 copies to more than 100,000 in print today (with more than 25,000 copies each of the German and English versions)” the 2001 edition featured “230 “three-glass” rankings, 1,681 producers, and 12,045 wines.

The duality of the superficial nature of the pleasureseeking dining club and the political machine of the central office of Slow Food is also an essential component of the carnivalesque spirit of Slow Food. This carnivalesque spirit is witnessed by the movement’s use of ritualised resistance; Slow Food offers a benign licence for its middle-class members to protest against their own society. The protest is restrained, lacking the vigour of the 1990’s anti-globalisation demonstrations, and the acts of sabotage directed against McDonald’s by the French farmer and activist José Bové. Slow Food still borders on being a site of disorder, however, a force to cause actual change and a realm that offers a temporary release from the order of the everyday. It is a pleasurable safety valve for society, a bourgeois form charged with performing a similar function to that of Bakhtin’s Carnival.

**Conclusion**

Slow Food occupies a related, yet contrary, position to McDonald’s, located at the intersection of two competing historical narratives and the late twentieth-century interface between the order of modernity and the ‘disorder’ of postmodernity. Born of the order/disorder dialectic, Slow Food was catalysed by McDonald’s perceived intrusion into the Italian cultural landscape. Here Slow Food, like McDonald’s, is not a simple sign but rather a complex symbol. Slow is a surface representation, a sign of the deeper and wider dissatisfaction with modern life. Slow Food is an institutional example of the inherent disorder generated by a ‘hot’ society, a symbol of entropy referenced against an interpretation of McDonald’s as the sign of an emerging dominant system of order. The order/disorder dialectic structured the relationship between Slow Food as a protest movement and McDonald’s, by enforcing a position defined by the binary opposite values expressed by the sign McDonald’s.
By taking a gastronomic stance, Slow Food has appealed to ‘reasoned thinking’, which remains integral to the differentiation of gastronomy from previous forms of the love of good dining. It has used food symbolism to contrast competing forms of order, then, by using Brillat-Savarin’s construct of food as the central ordering influence on society, Slow Food has exercised its moral stance of ‘eco-gastronomy’ and persuaded people to pursue its utopian model by ‘eating a better world’. While history may have transformed some aspects of gastronomy between that proposed by Brillat-Savarin to those articulated by Slow Food, the gastronomic philosophy has remained largely static in relationship to the hegemonic structure of society. Brillat-Savarin used the top-down cover of pseudo-science and the voice of ‘Professor’ to legitimate his message. Slow Food has used the voice of the artisan, a bottom-up ‘folk’ perspective, to speak out against modern Western society. Separated by an epoch, both voices preach a similar message of disorder, a gastronomically-driven utopian image that challenges the dominant narrative of the day.

Slow Food, like Brillat-Savarin’s pleas, has not been able to silence the moral criticism of gastronomy as elitist gluttony, an articulation of order’s attempt to silence the disordered voice. Gastronomy, with its strong links to bodily pleasure, remains in a liminal position, subservient in a Western social hierarchy that values mind over body. It ambiguously treads a fine line between demonstration of refinement and transgression into excess, within a bourgeois interpretation of the ‘civilising process’. While the business aspect of Slow Food reflects this binary relationship by mirroring aspects of McDonald’s mode of working (the mass-marketing of a centrally constructed gastronomy) to have the desired effect of transforming foodways and reordering society, Slow Food’s gastronomy must remain on the margins, attracting its own detractors, offering a critique of the existing society while holding out a utopian alternative. It is only from a liminal position that gastronomy is empowered with disorder’s power to influence change.

Like Carnival, Slow Food offers a symbolic experience of an altered existence. But just as Finkelstein (1989) argued that dining out is an inherently ‘uncivilised’ activity so too is Slow Food in its own way. The order is imposed externally; Slow Food is one pole in a binary still linked to McDonald’s, structured by the status quo. Slow Food, in its embrace of gastronomy, is not however benign. From Brillat-Savarin to
Slow Food, gastronomy has sought to embrace duality, has questioned the existing food related values and practices and sought to provide a more moral approach to conspicuous consumption and the production practice of eating. In response to McDonald’s as a sign, Slow Food’s gastronomy has desired to make the individual pleasure of eating a collective means of social reform, and to provide, in the embrace of disorder, a vehicle for an examined existence.

Slow Food, because of its structural relationship to McDonald’s, adds to and offers insight into the ambiguity and complexity of McDonald’s as one of the most powerful food symbols of the late twentieth century. Ordered by the principles that govern binary and social hierarchical relationships, these two food signs highlight the double face of resistance that exists in the order/disorder dialectic. Slow Food offers disorder to McDonald’s order and order to McDonald’s disorder. This juxtaposition recognises the historical perspective that structuralism lacked, by intertwining the two historical narratives characterised by Elias and Bakhtin, in a manner that combines both the differentiated perspectives of the duality of order offered by Rabelais and Brillat-Savarin. This in turn recognises the central role of disorder in the order/disorder dialectic and that this meaning is conveyed through culinary language. It is only by this mode of reading McDonald’s, and now also the binary partner Slow Food, that the ambiguity and complexity of these signs can be decoded. It is in the decoding of this ambiguousness and complexity that McDonald’s (and Slow Food) emerges as a vehicle for an examined existence.
The meditation: some concluding thoughts

In 1825, when Brillat-Savarin (1970) published the text that lay the foundations of his gastronomic ‘science’, restaurants were a relatively new concept, a product of the dramatic social changes of the age. Intrigued by the social spectacle that this new form of public dining afforded, (from elegant saloons to cheaper fixed-price restaurants), Brillat-Savarin (1970, p. 269) suggested that restaurants offered “the keen eye of the philosopher a spectacle well worth his interest.”

What then would Brillat-Savarin think of McDonald’s? This thesis has sought to address the ‘spirit’ of this question. Following the tradition set by Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomic meditations, McDonald’s has been employed as a channel for contemplation, chosen because of its dominance as a form of restaurant, and in its subsequent role as one of the most powerful food symbols of the late twentieth century.

Drawing upon Brillat-Savarin’s understanding that food acts as a signifier within a culinary language, a language capable of communicating complex and ambiguous meanings, McDonald’s has been examined by employing a theoretical advance on the structuralist perspective. Initially, through a return to the classics of structuralism, an understanding was developed of how meaning in food and foodways can be theorised. Structuralism was seen to produce a useful theoretical explanation of food, not simply as a biological necessity, but as a form of code capable of articulating intricate meanings. More importantly, food was demonstrated to be a means of conveying a coherent and consistent map of the deep structures that inform the system of order by which a society understands its world. This foundation in the methodology of the mapping of order is critical to decoding the complexity of McDonald’s as a sign. It is acknowledged, however, that critics of structuralism rightly point out that the food habits articulated by this type of map are presented in a limited static mode. This does not fully explain observed ambiguities or historical change.
The limitations in the structuralist approach to mapping order have been overcome, by ‘pushing’ structuralism to reposition disorder onto centrestage, as a vital part of a system of a continuing and constitutive dialectic between order and disorder, and part of a duality of order. This shift to focusing on disorder showcases the regenerative properties of disorder--its ability to generate change in the existing order--and illustrates the system of order’s dynamism. Far from being static, this dialectic construct of order and disorder explains the process of change. The course of this change in Western society can be plotted with a purposeful account of the trajectory set, by referencing back to the primary binary (nature/culture) and ‘thermo dynamic’ workings of Lévi-Strauss’s ‘hot’ society.

To demonstrate the manner in which this order/disorder dialectic generates food meanings McDonald’s was set into the trajectory of the ‘hot’ society and thus positioned into the longer history of Western society. The thesis sets McDonald’s at the intersection of two versions of the history of food and order. In each of these historical narratives the order/disorder dialectic can be seen to play a different historical role. The first history is the dominant narrative of the Western ‘hot’ society, the increasing rationalisation of order, featuring the slow triumph of the bourgeoisie through the civilising process. This is a top-down perspective of social order, characterised by the theory advanced by Elias. The second history is a counternarrative focused upon the relevance of disorder as an ever-present, positive and regenerative force. This view, theorised by Bakhtin, utilises the power of the carnivalesque in a bottom-up folk culture challenge to the hegemonic order. Taken individually, both food histories contribute a different understanding of how we construct the meaning of food. Simultaneously, however, both perspectives are found to be similarly limited by not fully accounting for their counter perspective.

What is required to decode the complexity inherent in the sign McDonald’s is a record that illustrates the understanding of an intertwined perspective of these two opposing and complementary narratives. To facilitate this mode of reading, where disorder is purposely brought to centrestage in a historical context, two key moments in food history were presented.
The first returns to and examines Bakhtin’s source, the treatment of food in the texts of Rabelais. These texts are written at the interface between medieval ‘disorder’ and the then-imminent bourgeois order of modernity. Rabelais can, however, be seen to use more than the carnivalesque elements upon which Bakhtin focused. The texts use the full richness of the culinary language to help create a purposeful juxtaposition of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, order and disorder, and to engage the reader. Cautioning his reader about the difficulty of the task, Rabelais (Prologue, Book 1) suggests not to dismiss the work simply as a mockery or tomfoolery; this request helps to preserve the centrality of disorder in the text. Rabelais can be seen to encourage the insight offered in an embrace of disorder, by cautioning against simply annihilating disorder. It was through careful reading and meditation, that incorporated both a top-down and, importantly, a bottom-up perspective, that Rabelais requested the reader approach his texts, slowly uncovering a positive and meaningful engagement with the state of politics and domestic life. This simultaneous reading of competing narratives (the type of which is needed to decode McDonald’s) is, as Bakhtin (1984) reminds us, and as shown by successive critiques of Rabelais, difficult. Moving beyond the narrow emphasis of the dominant, serious bourgeois narrative to incorporate the carnivalesque nature of folk culture into the analysis has proved a significant challenge for centuries of readers.

Rabelais’ advice not to dismiss his text as a meditation on the inconsequential is echoed in Brillat-Savarin’s own book, positioned as it is at a second key moment in history: the triumph of eighteenth-century rationalism. Setting out his ‘science’ of gastronomy in the authoritative voice of the ‘Professor’, Brillat-Savarin is critically aware that--despite his perspective of the centrality of food to life, society and the individual--the topic of food may be viewed by others as trivial. Brillat-Savarin’s gastronomy represents an intertwining of the two historical food narratives, but in a different manner to the ‘bottom-up’ approach that characterises Rabelais (particularly Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais). Gastronomy can be seen purposely to create a sense of ambiguity by combining the normally separate ‘high’ culture perspective (represented by the ‘mind’), with a traditional ‘low’ culture perspective, represented by the ‘body’ (stomach) that more commonly defined food and eating. The inherent ambiguity, and therefore the disordered properties of food as both biological necessity and cultural construct, is amplified by the ambiguous properties of Brillat-
Savarin’s gastronomy. The intertwined mind/body, high/low, order/disorder dialectic ‘pushes’ the engaged reader, by encouraging a decoding of this ambiguity, toward Brillat-Savarin’s (1970, p. 52) definition of gastronomy as “the reasoned comprehension of everything connected with the nourishment of man.” Here a gastronomic meditation of food, because of the created ambiguity generated by the operation of the order/disorder dialectic, offers a means of engaging at a deeper level, and of using food as a vehicle to make sense of the world in a more meaningful manner. This potential, driven by the inherent disorder of gastronomy, challenges us to read Brillat-Savarin as advocating a culinary ‘civilising process,’ that simply sought to impose more order on eating. Brillat-Savarin demonstrates that gastronomy needs to be understood as an active embrace of a rebellious philosophy, driven by the order/disorder dialectic.

The two key moments in food history offered by Rabelais and Brillat-Savarin provide a historical trace across modernity, which in turn validates McDonald’s (and Slow Food’s) positioning at a third key moment in food history. The two competing historical narratives intersect at the interface between the order of modernity and the ‘disorder’ of postmodernity. At each of the two previous key historical moments, there was an intertwining of the two narratives that created a decided ambiguity, a purposeful recourse to disorder. This disorder, while differentiated by its role in the order/disorder dialectic, was harnessed to challenge and critique the existing order. Here disorder was taken not simply as a challenge to order, but as part of the pursuit of the examined existence. In this form, as seen by the pro- and anti-McDonald’s debates, disorder in a ‘hot’ society can be seen to act as a positive force of renewal and reflection, acting as a means of restraint (a brake) on the excess rationalisation of order (Elias’s monopolies). For the individual, disorder can be seen to help create the form of civility to which Finkelstein (1989) alludes.

Decoding the complex and differentiated meanings of McDonald’s can be seen to offer the same challenges and opportunities of insight that were presented by Rabelais and Brillat-Savarin. The importance of McDonald’s to the modern food landscape should be beyond question, but a gastronomic meditation on McDonald’s may still warrant a plea to not dismiss the topic as trivial. In this philosophical context, McDonald’s needs to be understood not as a hamburger restaurant, but
rather as a complex ambiguous sign, that acts as a surface representation of the social order that structures Western culture at the end of the twentieth century. As a sign, McDonald’s offers the reader a portal to a deeper understanding of our society.

McDonald’s is a product of its time and place in history. Generated as a product of the order of modernity, McDonald’s has become a signifier of the interface of modernity and postmodernity. As a restaurant, McDonald’s was seen to symbolise the rationalisation of order, the triumph of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the civilising process. However, the success of McDonald’s as a restaurant is reliant not simply on the application of measures that increase order. Success is also attributable to the transgression of the traditional order that defines the restaurant experience. An embrace of elements of the carnivalesque, of disorder, has structured the McDonald’s experience ambiguously, a juxtaposition of food as both form and function, in a manner where the order/disorder dialectic can be seen to play a different role to that associated with the ‘traditional’ restaurant.

To decode this ambiguity as a restaurant, McDonald’s offers elements of meaning that can be used in the manner of bricolage, allowing the reader to construct his or her own understanding, his or her own order, from these existing elements. These elements, in any of the bricoleur’s interpretations maintain something of their own inherent symbolic histories. Reliant on the bricoleur’s perspective and experience, McDonald’s is understood in relationship to a position set by the duality of order. It is typically viewed from the class-constructed perspective of the separate histories, and presented as either a symbol of a ‘top-down’ bourgeois construct, as a manifestation of the increasing rationalisation of order, or as embracing the carnivalesque spirit, a triumph of folk culture that is seen to offer challenges to the hegemony. These separate readings perpetuate the misreading of McDonald’s, by negating the disordered aspect of the expression of McDonald’s as sign. To understand McDonald’s requires a simultaneous reading from both perspectives of the duality of order, in the context of the consistent and constitutive order/disorder dialectic.

The rich reading needed to embrace this position is aided by meditation on McDonald’s as part of a gastronomic binary. This is not the simple oppositional fast-
food/Slow Food binary, but a more complex relationship where McDonald’s is representative of one value set in relationship to the changing historic nature of gastronomy. This is a gastronomy that simultaneously embraces Brillat-Savarin’s mind/body ‘science’ of the future and praise for popular, cheap, fixed-price restaurants, through to Slow Food’s anti-McDonald’s protest and eco-gastronomic construct of the past. In this binary, the focus needs to remain not on either order, expressed in their respective polar values, but in the relationship between the poles, where disorder is seen to play a different but comparable role. This order/disorder dialectic sees both McDonald’s and gastronomy as symbols that simultaneously express bourgeois order and disordered resistance to the hegemony. Here McDonald’s is order to gastronomy’s disorder, and disorder to the order of gastronomy. This juxtaposition can be understood symbolically in terms of a utopian offer, a means proffered by both McDonald’s and gastronomy to ‘eat a better existence’.

McDonald’s should be understood as important in the context of a gastronomic meditation. It is one of the most powerful food symbols of the late twentieth century, offering a spectacle worthy of interest, a convenient vehicle by which to examine and question our society. When we “pushed” structuralism to embrace disorder (as principal component of a continuing and constitutive dialectic between order and disorder and part of a duality of order), we reveal much about McDonald’s. Its intriguing and complex ambiguity, and its relationship with gastronomy emerge. It can be used to demonstrate how the meaning of food is produced, and how disorder can be a positive force in a ‘hot’ society. Despite the seeming triviality of the topic, a gastronomic meditation: on McDonald’s, is a vital ingredient of an examined existence.
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