Recent sociological discourse refers to the period in which we now live as that of 'late' or 'high' modernity (Giddens, 1991), or commonly 'post-modernity'. The post-modern era signifies a “vast cultural transformation in Western societies” (Sarup, 1996, pg. 95) characterised by the fragmentation and decline of traditional meta-narratives and universal standardisation of society (Sarup, 1996) and an increased awareness of self-identity of our personal life 'stories' (Giddens, 1991). The post-modern era, therefore is a time where individuals can chose many forms of lifestyle that they would not perhaps have been able to in times of 'modernity' and these may come to form part of the individuals' conceptions of the self.

These perspectives are reflected in many ‘everyday’ activities that today's citizens regard as 'normal' behaviour. It can be useful to reflect on these activities in order to reveal the workings of post-modern theories in practice. This exercise will analyse the 'everyday' activity of a couple going on a first date in order to explore the post-modern rationalisation of relationship formation and the cultural practices of consumption and identity formation via the common 'first-date territory' of the cinema and going for something to eat.

Firstly it is useful to look at the couple on their first date, who might they be and why did they choose the cinema? As for who they are, in Modernity it may have been expected to see a young heterosexual couple, possibly courting, as part of a standardized and expected life course (Giddens, 1992), but in post-modern times the couple could be young or old, never-married, heterosexual or homosexual, divorced or have children from a previous relationship. Giddens (1992) enforces the idea of reflexivity when individuals embark on a relationship, stating that the sexual revolution of the post-modern era has allowed for extended relationship choice, and that relationships may be more freely based on sexual attraction over forming a stable and viable economic platform for a traditional heterosexual family to survive. Bauman (2003) reflects on the possibilities in post-modern times for relationships to be formed, reformed or abandoned altogether at the will of an individual rather than as a prescribed life-course.

The cinema, or more specifically film, from a post-modern perspective is an interesting area to study, Denzin (1991), shows that in a post-modern era the medium of cinematic film reveals what holds meaning for individuals; some films may be used as a tool to reflect present society, harp back to a 'classic' time, subvert reality or re-affirm it. In this sense, media can be reviewed to be as reflexive as post-modern society. Our couple may choose a
film that is fitting with their personal identities, in a sense seeking affirmation for their life choices in a time of change and flux. Denzin (1991, pg. 5) states “The postmodern world is characterized by the cultivation of conspicuous consumption consumer lifestyles...which stress the prestige and exchange value of appearance, civility and personal pleasure and desire”.

Consumer lifestyles may be confirmed, reaffirmed or realised through media, in this instance, one of the couple watching the film may see an actor and admire their new haircut, leading them to have a similar style cut themselves, or product placement within the film may suggest a certain item may in some way enhance the projection of a certain lifestyle, or promote a form of conspicuous ‘cultural eclecticism’ (Denzin, 1991). In this sense the distinction between reality can be blurred (the watcher may ‘take on’ some of the characteristics of a character) and the postmodern ideal of conspicuous consumption may be reinforced.

Upon leaving the cinema, it is safe to assume that a fast-food outlet, like McDonald’s, will be somewhere close. From a post-modern perspective, McDonald’s can be seen almost as the epitome of conspicuous consumption, reflexivity and fast-paced living. Although possibly not the most romantic of settings for a date, Ritzer (2000) highlights that McDonald’s, alongside other rationalized and standardized corporations, has expanded its presence on many high streets across the globe in recent decades, and provides many people with a feeling of familiarity. The feeling of familiarity is achieved via the standardization of products; our couple could arguably walk into a McDonald’s in any city in many countries across the globe, order a product and have it presented in exactly the same manner as anywhere else, by an employee dressed the same and using the same standardized language as everywhere else. Some cultural variation does occur, such as the use (or disuse) of pork or lamb in some places, but the basic principle of standardization applies (Ritzer, 2000).

The McDonaldization thesis does not only apply to fast-food outlets, Ritzer (2000) believes that the principles of franchising, efficiency, standardization (‘predictability’), increased use of technology and rationalisation employed by the McDonald’s have come to be expressed in many areas of post-modern life, including education, healthcare and politics. Amongst his criticisms of the increased presence of this system in everyday life is the idea of homogenisation; if a McDonald’s is exactly the same in London as it is in New York is there a place for cultural difference? Particularly in a post-modern era when Globalisation is a force that is reflective of the McDonaldization process on a worldwide scale.

Continuing with the theme of a couple on a date, will they stay together or never meet again, and how likely to succeed is a relationship in a post-modern era? As Giddens (1992) highlights, there are no formal societal rules or ties holding the couple together, should they decide they are not ‘compatible’ there are no sanctions to face; arguably this occurrence is frequent enough that nobody would bat an eyelid. In furthering their relationship, this couple would again face uncertain paths and many choices. In the past, the (heterosexual) couple may have had a set out on a regimented journey from courtship to marriage, children and gender-specific work spheres (Giddens, 1991) however in a post-modernity their path and choices are characterised by the scope of choice available, such as cohabiting or ‘living apart together’ (Smart, 2011).

If the couple are homosexual, Giddens (1992) points to the post-modern value of choice and reflexivity in relationship formation and relays that choice of partner is no longer restrictive nor as criticised than in modern times, Giddens (1992) also reveals the compulsion to form lasting and meaningful relationships is not restricted to the heterosexual section of society, as was assumed in previous decades. The same-sex couple have the same expectations for their relationship to continue and succeed as a heterosexual couple,
and reflexivity and choice are open to them more than they might have been in a time of Modernity (Giddens, 1992), as Bauman (2003) explains, post-modern relationships are characterised by many choices, including whether they be brief, fleeting, long-standing based on individual will rather than normative assumptions of what a couple ‘should be’. The right for same-sex couples to a 'civil partnership' may be a recent example of the wider reflexivity in relationship formation, however Einarsdottir (2011), believes that 'marriage' is a 'heteronormalised' institution, that is, if an individual is discussing their marriage often people will assume it is to a partner of the opposite sex.

Smart (2011) looks at the choices available for a heterosexual couple, highlighting that the living patterns of couples has changed in recent years to include a rise in cohabitation, a decline in marriage and an increase in divorce, alongside issues such as 'living apart together’ and people choosing to live alone. Smart (2011) reveals that there is a mind-set continuing in post-modern times that a person might expect to marry at some point in their lives. However, the decline in marriage rates since the 1970s reveals the presumption that marriage is a ‘natural’ progression of romantic love may no longer be applicable (Giddens, 1992; Smart, 2011). Alongside this, divorce rates have shared a similar increase since the Second World War, and although have plateaued somewhat in very recent times reveal the stigma associated in the past with ending a relationship is now, to a large extent, lessened (Smart, 2011). Again Bauman (2003) may be drawn upon here to reveal that relationships may be characterised by individual choice rather than a prescribed life-course.

This report has attempted to review the post-modern theories on relationship formation, media influence on identity and conspicuous consumption and the idea of McDonaldization through the medium of a fictional couple on a date. It is interesting to review this piece by stating that the sexuality of the couple may not be explicitly determined due to the post-modern phenomena of reflexivity when forming a relationship (Giddens, 1992), overall this serves as a poignant reminder of the idea of the view that life is now, more than ever, shaped by the choices we make.

Bibliography:


Picture 1:
http://crowbloke.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/internet-dating.html

Picture 2:
http://www.astramatch.com/blog/online-dating-exhaustion/