

Modern society made up of all types

November 4 2010, By Katherine Smith

Modern society has an intense interest in classifying people into ‘types’, according to a University of Melbourne Cultural Historian, leading to potentially catastrophic life-changing outcomes for those typed – seen in such recent usage as ‘queue jumper’ rather than ‘asylum seeker’, or ‘gold-digger’, rather than ‘rape victim’.

“By typing someone we run the risk of removing their rights, and degrading their individuality, in cases of valid refugees or genuine victims of sexual assault, even going so far as to deprive them of justice,” says Liz Conor, from the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.

Dr. Conor says we are all surrounded by a maelstrom of personalities, and it is a “function of modernity that we need to identify people, to be safe, and in order to create a community for ourselves,” she says.

But she also says modern culture uses typing playfully and as a very effective means of communication: a metrosexual is a sensitive man interested in fashion and appearance, but isn’t gay; a chardonnay socialist is someone who is interested in leftist politics but isn’t working class, for example.

“The play of types is quite delicate,” Dr. Conor says, “and can often be about positioning yourself socially.”

“While some types – emo or Goths for instance – are kinds of ‘packet mix’ personas that you pick up off the supermarket shelf, and involve a

lot of material consumption to maintain, those wanting to enter the tribe need very acute social radar in terms of the music that they are listening to, clubs or parties they are going out to, or language use.

“One can look seriously naïve if they don’t recognise the typing cues,” she says.

Behaviours using “social avatars” have been around for a while says Dr. Conor. “ It’s just that it hasn’t found a home in critical theory yet.”

“The flapper (a sexually emancipated, single young working woman from the 1920s), the Digger, the Beatnik, are all examples of types that inform modern life and culture.

“By organizing this symposium we are hoping to establish a field of analysis and to understand the occurrence of types, their linguistic function, their political effects and their implications for methodologies across the disciplines,” she says.

Provided by University of Melbourne

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