

Let's eat cake! Luxury unwrapped

July 1 2013



French fancies. Credit: lilivanili on Flickr

Alice Blackhurst is one of six Cambridge PhD candidates to take part in a series of podcast interviews offering an insight into graduate research in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Her work focuses on ideas of luxury.

In a much professed age of austerity, it's interesting to reflect on the role of [luxury](#), as a counterpoint to a battering of hatches and tightening of budgets. And yet, what counts as 'luxurious' is far from clear-cut. Is luxury a designer handbag made in Milan, a day spent basking in tropical sunshine, or simply not having to do the washing up?

Today luxury is a slippery and relativistic concept, often hijacked by brand strategists and advertising agencies, and increasingly detached from a specific referent. In the 13th century, luxury had a more literal, graphic sense, used to denote the act of sexual intercourse. In the 14th century, it took on a moralising function, indicating lusting and debauchery, as suggested by the French word *luxure*.

The British have long associated luxury with everything French: fine wines and delicious artisan cheeses, couture fashion, afternoon promenades along shady boulevards to cafés for a leisurely coffee and a slice of tarte Tatin. France is a place we can escape to in our imagination when skies are grey - as the phenomenal sales of travelogues, such as Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*, testify.

Alice Blackhurst is a PhD student in the Department of Modern and Medieval Languages. Her thesis (provisionally titled 'A Life of Luxury: Life Writing and Excess in Contemporary French Literature, Art, Thought and Film') looks at contemporary French culture in relation to luxury through the lens of literature and film.

Her research attempts to capture the experiential aspects of modern life in France and in the process crosses many boundaries. Looking in particular at theories of having and not having, she explores how luxury is linked with notions of transgression and licentiousness, which embed luxury with that which is elicited and forbidden – the cigarette smoked outside the office, a cake with pink frosted icing, the take-away coffee cradled on the train.

"It's somewhat ironic that a graduate student should choose to look at luxury, as students are famously broke. And I'd be the first to admit that studying luxury is in many ways a luxury. What appealed to me about the PhDcasts project, however, was the opportunity to stress on camera that an arts PhD is a work in progress; a long slog rather than a leisurely

vocation, whose ideas really benefit from being talked through with other researchers," said Blackhurst.

"Luxury is often evoked in transcendent terms. In the words of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida, it's something that is 'above and beyond need,' something which exceeds banality and the everyday. But to my mind, luxury is something more contained and measured; existing in the two weeks of summer holiday people typically take each year, the five extra minutes in the shower before work, the tube of branded lipstick bought when you can't afford the handbag."

At the same time, luxuriating involves a kind of active wallowing and revelling – something that is lost in our sped up, instant culture where relentless progress and the quick turnover of capital and information are placed as paramount. In such a context, luxury's deliberate stagnating might be offered as a mode of resistance.

Blackhurst said: "There's a tendency to see luxury as a kind of passive consumption. My thesis attempts to counter this by asking whether modes of producing, and particularly processes of making art, can also be considered as luxurious. Contemporary 'life-writing' practices in France – or writing in a semi-autobiographical, semi-fictionalised vein about one's own life – are frequently denounced as decadent, overly self-involved, and even gratuitous acts. In contrast, films which revel or 'luxuriate' in their own cinematic qualities – light, sound, texture and image – are celebrated."

Luxury is a notion not just linked to our consumption of things but also connected to our use of time. The French have a word *flânerie*, which doesn't really have an English equivalent, for a state of luxurious idling or strolling at whim, a refusal to be caught up in the unseemly rush to be somewhere on time. "It's something that in the digital age we are aware of missing out on, as the growing popularity of Mindfulness practices,

which seek to refocus our attention on the present moment, indicate," said Blackhurst.

"I'm not yet sure how possible it is to think about luxury outside economic terms and frameworks. 'Luxury' automatically invites the qualifier 'luxury product'. Any argument for luxury as experiential must therefore tread carefully because the market ensnares all – with even 'experience' packaged and sold to us these days. To rethink luxury as an experience of immersion and attention beyond paradigms of consumption and production will be a challenge."

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Let's eat cake! Luxury unwrapped (2013, July 1) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-07-cake-luxury-unwrapped.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.