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POSTMODERN SCENE – REWRITING MODERNITY?

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ABSTRACT

The origins and definitions of modernity are varied and often confusing. Many consider it a continuation of Modernity while others consider it a break from it. This paper tries to trace the history of the term *viz-a-viz* Modernism through the interjections of theorists like Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Francois Lyotard.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Modernity, Postmodernity, Modernism, Jameson, Foucault, Baudrillard and Lyotard.

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Introduction

The term modern comes from *modo* in Latin meaning ‘just now’ or similar to ‘mode’ or ‘fashion’. What is in ‘mode’ now is ‘modern’. Modern implies something which is contrary to the traditional or established norms. It thus offers a critique of established superstructures – political, moral, religious and legal. It tries to offer a scientific explanation of everything and explain reality not only objectively but also as experienced by the subject. Modern endeavor thus is compelled by “the lure of heresy” where it tries to subvert the conventional sensibilities and also “a commitment to a principal self-scrutiny” (Gay 3-4). Where modernity breaks with the endless reiteration of traditional (classic) themes, topics and myths, postmodernity operates at the places of closure in modernity.

To be modern is to search for self-conscious expressive forms through which everything traditional can be ‘made new’, and establish a new center, order and structure in place of old one. To be postmodern is to search the ways for going beyond the structures and to decenter the primary and often secondary works of modernist inscriptions. The fundamental question then is – whether enframed modernist thinking establishes the conditions for a postmodern thinking? If it can be, as I will try to establish, that postmodern thinking circumscribes and delimits modernist thinking, what exactly is the place where modern thinking comes to an end? This closure does not occur at many places except one, i.e. Methodology. Between modernity and postmodernity, there is a fundamental methodological gap. Things, ideas and relationships viewed from one method may not be the same if they are viewed from a different method. The uncertainty regarding the origin of postmodernity does not occur at many places and certainly not in very many ways except one that is methodology. The demarcation line between modernity and postmodernity could properly be understood only in terms of methodology alone.

Postmodern has become a buzz-word, a sort of cliché, but defining the term puts one in jeopardy of undermining and betraying its true meaning. A single, unifying definition of postmodernism is not possible. There are many theories and interpretations, some interact with each other and some do not. The views vary from considering “it as a dramatic break from Modernism and a continuation of it; it is a progressive development from Marxism and a denial and renunciation of Marxism’s basic tenets; it is radically left wing and neo-conservative; it is both radical and reactionary; it advocates the dissolution of the grand narratives and is, in itself, the grand narrative of the end of the grand narratives; it is the projection of the aesthetic on to the cultural and cognitive fields; it is the cultural logic of late capitalism; it is the loss of the real; it is a renunciation of all critical philosophical standards; and it is a radical critique of philosophy and the fields of representation” (Snitt-Walmsley 406-406).

It is difficult to locate a singular theory or interpretation of the postmoderns, and locating its origin or beginning poses numerous problems. The broad range of its development spills over different fields of academia. “We have music (Cage, Stockhausen, Briers, Holloway, Tredici, Laurie Anderson); art (Rauschenberg, Baselitz, Mach, Schnabel, Kiefer; some would also include Warhol and 1960s pop art, and others Bacon); fiction (Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, and the novels of Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, Burroughs, Ballard, Doctorow); film (*Body Heat*, *The Wedding*, *Blue Velvet*, *Wetherby*); drama (the theatre of Artaud); photography (Sherman, Levine, Prince); architecture (Jencks, Venturi, Bolin); literary theory and criticism (Spanos, Hassan, Sontag, Fiedler); philosophy (Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard, Vattimo, Rorty); anthropology (Clifford, Tyler, Marcus); sociology (Denzin); geography (Soja).” (Featherstone 2)

The term postmodern was being used as early as 1870’s.¹ It was the historian Arnold Toynbee who elaborated the usage of the term when he used it in his *A Study of History* written in 1939 (Toynbee 43). Toynbee’s postmodern, according to Simon Malpas, is an age which is apocalyptic in nature and comes after Modern Age. He believes that the post-modern age will come when humanity has progressed and moved from Dark Ages (675-1075) through Middle Ages (1075-1475) to Modern Age (1475-1875) (Malpas, *Postmodern* 33). Toynbee envisions postmodernity as a venture into an unknown territory where the society’s collective security is potentially compromised and old cultural constraints are inapplicable (Sim 17).

Charles Olson then uses the term around 1950’s seeking to develop with it an “alternative to the whole Greek system” (Olson 5) because, according to him, western culture has blocked itself towards true experience and has become obsessive in intellectualizing every human experience due to its adherence to Greek rationalism (Bertens 21).

In 1959 Irving Howe uses the term in his famous essay “Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction.”² Howe’s importance in the discussion is that his analysis of the postwar consumer society inaugurates a Leftist interpretation of postmodernism (Bertens 22) and the characteristics that he identifies with the developing postmodern culture are later elaborated by Fredric Jameson as well as Jean Baudrillard.

Jameson’s Marxist critique recognizes continuity between modern and postmodern. For him capitalism is still dominant though in its late phase and postmodern society is the cultural logic of this late capitalism. Jameson’s analysis identifies five basic elements of postmodern society (Ritzer 478-79). Postmodern society, according to him, is characterized by: (1) superficiality and lack of depth. According to Jameson “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality” (Jameson 10) has emerged and simulacra – “the identical copy for which no original ever existed” (Jameson 17) – has become a defining feature of postmodern society. This is due to implosion of images, where the cultural products are now satisfied by surfaces and do not delve deep into the underlying meanings; (2) waning of emotion or affect. According to Jameson there is a “waning of affect in postmodern culture” (Jameson 9); (3) loss of historicity. For Jameson, the postmodern society suffers

¹ The earliest usage of the term comes from John Watkins Chapman followed by Rudolf Pannwitz, Federico de Onis and Bernard Iddings Bell.

² Irving Howe. “Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction.” in *Partisan Review* XXVI, 1959.

from the symptom of “waning of our historicity” (Jameson 20), that we cannot know the past and all we have access to are the texts about the past, and all we can do is to produce yet other texts about that topic; (4) the new technology of this age. Jameson argues that the nature of new technology of this age is “reproduction rather than . . . production.” (5) that it is dominated by the late capitalism. The postmodern culture, according to Jameson, can be grasped only when it is seen “as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism.” (Jameson 45)

Baudrillard is considered a *guru* of postmodern thought though he never used the term in his writings as such. For him the present society is an advance consumer society which has entered, what he calls, the ‘third order of simulacra’ i.e., Simulation, replacing Counterfeit and Production (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 79). He prefers to call this social life ‘hypermodernity’ (Baudrillard, *Live* 133) rather than postmodern. The social life is completely altered as consumption has replaced production as a driving force and this “consumption is defined not by the possession of material goods, but by a system of symbolic or sign relations. Consumer objects are part of an advertising system that constitutes a “code” or social classification system” (Gabardi 19). This age is marked by the proliferation of images and loss of meaning. There is no possibility of telling what is real as the distinction between signs and reality has imploded (Ritzer 481). For Baudrillard this age is the age of simulation and the process of simulation leads to the creation of simulacra, or “reproduction of objects or events” (Kellner 78). Thus, he claims that this world is “hyperreal” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 1). For Baudrillard, this “culture . . . [is] . . . undergoing a massive and catastrophic revolution . . . [which] . . . involves the masses becoming increasingly passive, rather than increasingly rebellious, as they were to the Marxists” (Ritzer 482). This mass majority of the society is a new postmodern silent majority that refuses to be represented. People are aware that the political system is self-legitimizing and that in the world of televisual democracy voters have been effectively replaced by their own simulated projection constructed by the mass media and public opinion assessors. The ‘people’, a statistical simulation, have responded by adopting the posture of “hyperconformity.” (Baudrillard, *Shadow* 41)

As far as Foucault is considered, he does not consider himself a postmodernist nor does he call the present age postmodern. But even for Foucault the present age is marked entirely by power/knowledge relations. His works are also influenced by anti-enlightenment tradition and in this course he comes up with the issues that are very close to the postmodern tradition. Foucault’s anti-enlightenment, to anticipate a later discussion, tradition refers back to thinkers like Sade, Bataille, Nietzsche who reject the equation of reason, emancipation, progress and valorize transgressive forms of experience such as madness, violence or sexuality that break from the prison of rationality (Best 92).

Foucault rejects the fundamental feature of modernity, i.e. a unifying philosophical system that can systematically grasp all of reality from a single vantage point. In *The Order of Things* he says, “If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that . . . which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity - which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness” (Foucault xiv). In postmodern jargon these unifying systems, or vantage points are the grand narratives (elucidated in his work by Lyotard) and towards which every postmodern theorist as well as Foucault shows incredulity.

In the same way, Foucault’s methodological tool – archaeology – attacks the very base of modern theory based on metaphysics, which tries to give generalizations while he valorizes difference and discontinuity which are clear postmodern moves (Best 94).

Foucault’s notion of the death of Man clearly inaugurates a new postmodern episteme. According to Foucault, “man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end . . . [and] . . . would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (Foucault, *Order* 387). This new postmodern era, where a shift in discourse has taken place, inaugurates a posthumanist era where the subject (now an effect of language, desire, unconscious) no longer exists (Best 107).

The term Postmodern was popularized by Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In 1979, the Canadian Government assigned Lyotard to compile, assess and critically evaluate the intellectual climate and the status of knowledge in the most advanced countries of the Western Europe and

U.S.A. As a point of departure, Lyotard uses the term 'postmodern' to capture the climate. He analyzes the changing and transforming status of knowledge taking place in the fields of philosophy, science, literature, politics, art since the end of the 19th century. He calls this condition as 'the crisis of narratives' which implies to the narrative reflections of modernist conceptual framework in which a criterion or a standard or a legitimation with reference to its own system is designed. This could be an appeal to a Grand Narrative such as the Dialectic of Spirit (Hegel), Emancipation of the Rational Subject (Enlightenment Rationality of Kant) or the Working Subject (Marx).

According to Lyotard, the status of knowledge has changed significantly in present 'condition' where "societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (Lyotard, *Condition* 3). What he suggests is that the knowledge has become the same commodity as coal, gas and oil, which are bought and sold on the market, and is also the basis of power in society (Malpas, *Lyotard* 18-19). He says, "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange." (Lyotard, *Condition* 3) Also, "Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major - perhaps the major - stake in the worldwide competition for power" (Lyotard, *Condition* 5). Another important feature that Lyotard recognizes about knowledge in postmodern era is that there are different types of knowledge working in this society and "they have different criteria for being categorised as useful or true" (Malpas, *Lyotard* 20-21). For Lyotard, all knowledge is a narrative in a way that every form of knowledge including scientific knowledge needs narrative to elucidate, explain and justify its claims, discoveries or solutions. Narratives are the stories that communities tell themselves to explain their present existence, their history and ambitions for the future (Malpas, *Lyotard* 21). For this reason he distinguishes between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge (Lyotard, *Condition* 14). "Scientific knowledge", according to Lyotard "does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to . . . narrative" (Lyotard, *Condition* 7). Each narrative, according to Lyotard, of every discourse – be it of physics, chemistry, biology, literature, laws, customs, even gossip columns – establishes its legitimacy according to certain rules which he identifies as 'language games'. These games have their own set of rules and regulations and structure the society and decide what is legitimate and what is not (Malpas, *Lyotard* 23). For Lyotard, we as subjects exist in these language games in such a way that "[e]ven before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent of a story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course" (Lyotard, *Condition* 15). The narratives which organize language games and establish their legitimacy are called by Lyotard 'metanarratives'. These grandnarratives, according to Lyotard, have given rise to modernism and the critique of grandnarratives has led to postmodern condition. Thus according to Lyotard modernist metanarratives make systematic procedures for the sustenance of every individual, society and history. Grandnarratives account and construct the human society and its future by producing systemic accounts of the workings of the world, charting its development in history and at the same time giving the place of human beings in it (Malpas, *Postmodern* 37). According to Lyotard, there exist two main forms of grand narratives: grand narrative of speculation and grand narrative of emancipation. The grand narrative of speculation includes Hegel's dialectics of spirit while as the grand narrative of emancipation includes Kant's emancipation of the rational subject and Marx's emancipation of the working subject (Lyotard, *Condition* xxiii).

The grand narrative of speculation is "that human life . . . progresses by increasing its knowledge". For this grand narrative of speculation "True knowledge . . . is comprised of reported statements [that] are incorporated into a metanarrative of a subject that guarantees their legitimacy" (Lyotard, *Condition* 35). Thus speculative grand narrative "charts progress through the development of knowledge as individual ideas and discoveries build towards a systematic whole that reveals the truth of human existence under the auspices of a particular metanarrative . . . charts the progress and development of knowledge towards a systematic truth: a grand unified theory in which our place in the universe will be understood" (Malpas, *Postmodern* 37-38). The grand narrative of emancipation sees knowledge as the basis for human freedom. It "sees the development of knowledge as driving human freedom as it emancipates humanity from mysticism and dogma through

education: knowledge, on this account, 'is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject'" (Malpas, *Postmodern* 37-38).

Thus, both these grand narratives chart the course of whole humanity on the idea of development and progress leading towards emancipation. But the transformations, suggests Lyotard, in the status of knowledge that have taken place in the recent times have thrown them into doubt and they have lost their credibility. According to Lyotard, "In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (Lyotard, *Condition* 37). The global dissemination of capitalism and the rapid growth of science and technology have proved debilitating to these modern grand narratives and have shattered them. According to Lyotard, "The project of modernity has not been forsaken or forgotten, but destroyed, "liquidated"" (Lyotard, *Explained* 18) and when this project is liquidated a new age begins, a new mood, that of postmodernism which shows "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, *Condition* xxiv).

This definition of postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives does not complete the picture nor does it help to define postmodernism because the problem in defining postmodernism is that the two terms; modern and postmodern compete with each other in intricate ways. Just like postmodern, modern(ism) also has no single theory of origin and interpretation. It comes with its own paraphernalia mostly comprising of two terms: modernism and modernity.

Modernism is associated with the *avant-garde* artistic and literary movements where the stress has been to make everything new. In literature it developed with new styles of narration allowing new forms of experiences to be presented. In fine arts it took the form of Cubism and Surrealism that radically changed the way art was thought earlier. Modernity is more concerned with the structures of social organisation (politics, the law, etc.) and knowledge (science, philosophy, etc.)" (Malpas, *Lyotard* 8-9). Modern thinkers stress human autonomy and reason, and man as free intellectual agent and a firm belief that his thinking process is not coerced by historical or cultural circumstances (Sarup 1). Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) method of induction as the method of modern science became fully mature in the works of Issac Newton and Carolus Linnaeus.

In philosophy Rene Descartes' (1596-1650) phrase "I think, therefore I am" reflects the modern belief in human perfectibility through rationality. The emphasis on empiricism and the individual in the works of John Locke (1632-1704) fully develops into the doctrines of Individualism and political Liberalism fully explored in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, A letter Concerning Toleration, Two Treatises of Government*. These thoughts helped to establish self autonomy, individual rights, political equality, separation of state and religion and tolerance. Enlightenment is taken as the highest point in modernity and Kant's claim that "[e]nlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage" (Kant, 'Was ist Aufklärung' 101) marks the key note in assessing the type of rationality prevailing during modernity.

The origin of modern(ism) is a contested one among the scholars. For some like Marshall Berman, the modern locates its beginnings in the industrial revolution that took root in Europe and North American culture at the end of the 18th and throughout 19th century. For Terry Eagleton, Jürgen Habermas and Lyotard it can be seen in the developments at the end of 18th century such as American Independence, the French Revolution, the wars that consumed Europe at that time, and the revolutions in science and arts. For Homi Bhabha and Edward Said it is the period of European expansion that began in the Middle Ages and developed in the colonial conquest and imperialism that drove 19th century industrialization. For Martin Heidegger and Baudrillard it lies in the Renaissance and its spread through Europe issuing the birth of the modern subject in the philosophy of Descartes, the realignment of cosmos in Copernicus' discovery and new perspectives in artistic representation. For Jameson it is identified with the artistic modernism and locates it towards the end of 19th century and beginnings of 20th centur (Malpas, *Postmodern* 48-49).

Despite the divergent views of scholars relating to the interpretations and origins of modern(ism) there is a consensus, unlike postmodern, that it is a period of progress and industrial revolution where the main philosophical assumptions are "that world is composed of particular things which are distinct and separate from

one another (philosophical pluralism); that consciousness (the human self) and the world are mutually distinct, and there is an external reality independent of our minds; and that general ideas are formed from the association and abstraction of particular ones" (Habib 316). From this analysis we can see that modern and postmodern are contesting on a different level and that their relation is complex one to define.

Lyotard himself was aware of this fact that postmodern cannot be defined so easily in relation to modernism. In "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-' " (409-12), Lyotard fights with the same problem. He is confronted by the three facts: he certainly knows that some changes have taken place and old order is crumbling under the weight of rising new order. He sees this new order emerging with a break from older one but at the same time it also is a continuation of the older one. While dealing with this sort of tension he offers a sort of tripartite structure of postmodern in relation to modern. The first version sees it as a complete transformation from the previous. For this version he says, ". . . this perspective is that the 'post-' of 'postmodernism' has the sense of a simple succession, a diachronic sequence of periods in which each one is clearly identifiable. The 'post-' indicates something like a conversion: a new direction from the previous one" (Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of 'Post-' 410).

This version further problematizes the notion of postmodern for Lyotard as this version presupposes that postmodern is an addition or continuation of modernity. This brings Lyotard to the new version which sees dissatisfaction and a loss of faith in progress and universal principles. It is a moment where "it is no longer possible to call development progress" (Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of 'Post-' 411).

The problem that Lyotard sees in this version is that if the loss of faith in progress and universal principles or rationality has occurred then what is the need for substituting it with new sense of rationality. This brings Lyotard to his third version which is a sort of a historical stylistic account of postmodernism where "[It involves] a kind of work, a long, obstinate and highly responsible work concerned with investigating the assumptions implicit in modernity . . . [it is] a working through performed by modernity on its own meaning" (Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of 'Post-' 412).

This version seems to rectify modernity through rereading and seeks to challenge the discourses that have shaped the modern experience. The problem that stands before Lyotard is that these three versions do not stand alone and exclusively all the three are at flaw. Thus the three must be put together. For Lyotard 'the 'post-' of 'postmodern' does not signify a movement of comeback, flashback or feedback, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in 'ana-': a procedure of analysis, *anamnesis*, *anagogy* and *anamorphosis* which elaborates an 'initial forgetting' (Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of 'Post-' 412). Lyotard, thus suggests that postmodernism is a continuation of modernity but it does not deal with modernity in a nostalgic manner as modernism did. Rather it evokes the memory (anamnesis) of its past (modernity – in its artistic and literary works) in a diagnostic way (anamnesis in medical usage), or therapeutic way of free association as psychoanalysis does to a patient by recollecting his past experiences. By this postmodernism is able to diagnose and the problems are located with a questioning of 'expressions of thought' (Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of 'Post-' 412), so that the past is worked anew (anagogy, and anamorphosis) with a double movement in "a procedure in 'ana-' which means both again and anew.

The relationship of modern and postmodern is fraught with tensions and complexities. Despite all complications it can be said that there is a single and fundamental procedure according to which modern episteme works. It tries to break away from the old and carves out new ways of defining the self and its relation to the world. While Lyotard conceives this modern episteme in the form of narrative, he also criticizes it with his notion of postmodernity. Foucault, in his own way, is also suspicious of this modern episteme arising out of the focus on 'subject' and develops a critique of this subject centered modern episteme.

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