UNDERSTANDING THE POSTMODERN CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Although *postmodernism* is a very recent cultural phenomenon in the United States and in many other western and westernized countries, the term *postmodern* has been around for more than a century. Specifically, in the year 1870, John Watkins Chapman, an English salon painter, used the term for the first time to refer to what we now call Post-Impressionist painting. From that year on, various artists, critics, historians and scholars, have separately used the term to refer either to a historical period or to a cultural movement in western civilization. It was in the year 1970, a full century after Chapman's first usage, when the term *postmodern* was given its currently accepted meaning by Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan, when they used the same term to refer to a distinct development in American culture, which is a critical modification, if not an actual end, of modernism.

Although Sontag, Fiedler and Hassan's usage of the term is attuned to the generally and currently accepted meaning of the term, it still contains the two groups of meanings associated with the term throughout its century of existence: one group associates the term to a historical period, while the other group to a cultural movement. Thus, more recent theorists, critics, historians and scholars created the distinction between *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*. *Postmodernity* refers to the historical period after modernity, while *postmodernism* refers to the self-conscious cultural movement that reacted against modernism. For the sake of clarity, we have to distinguish the three terms:

- *Postmodern*: a generic term that can be used to refer either to postmodernism or postmodernity.
- *Postmodernity*: a term that refers to the historical period after modernity, as more specifically seen in the sequence: prehistory, ancient times, medieval period, modernity, and postmodernity.
- *Postmodernism*: a term that refers to a self-conscious cultural movement that reacted against the principles and ideals of the modernist movements in literature, art, architecture, film, philosophy, etc.

It appears now that the terms *postmodern*, *postmodernity* and *postmodernism* owe their existence from their difference from the terms *modern*, *modernity*, and

modernism. Hence, to thoroughly understand the *postmodern*, we need to understand first its definitional point of reference, the *modern*.

THE MODERN

The root word of *modern* is the Latin *modo*, meaning *just now*. Obviously, this etymological definition would not be of much help, because *modern* does not simply mean *just now*. Following the finer distinctions we applied to *postmodern*, we may take *modern* as the generic term, *modernity* as the historical period after the medieval and prior to postmodernity, and *modernism* as a self conscious cultural movement.

Modernity

Modernity is a historical period that spans through more than seven centuries, starting from the Renaissance of the 13th century and persisting even up to the present times. There are a number of historical events in modernity that gave the same period its distinctive outlook and way of life.

The first group of these events consists of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Reformation, and secularization. The Renaissance is basically the rediscovery of, and the rekindled interest for, the Ancient Greek and Roman literature, art and culture. The Enlightenment is the philosophical and cultural movement founded on reason that questioned the previously unreflected elements of tradition. The Reformation is founded on the challenging of the Catholic dogmatism by a new kind of theology based on a keener and closer interpretation of the Holy Bible. Secularization is the move to separate reason and culture from the dogmatism and traditionalism of religion and faith. These events gave modernity the following distinctive cast: a secular outlook, a faith in human reason, and a tendency to demystify, or objectify, the world.

Another significant historical event is the scientific revolution, or the breaking away of science from philosophy and folklore and its formation of a mathematical, quantitative and observational research method. This event gave modernity the following distinctive cast: a scientific and technological outlook, the belief in constant scientific and technological progress, the belief that the future will always be better than the present, and the compulsion for power and control

Another group of significant historical events consists of the rise of capitalism, and the industrial revolution. The rise of capitalism means the rapid decline of feudalism as the principal economic system. Here, the feudal production based on land, is replaced by production based on capitalist manufacturing. Industrial revolution is the innovation done by the capitalists when they harnessed technology to serve the needs of their factories. More simply, the industrial revolution is the switching from man power to machine power in the field of manufacturing. The rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution initially created tremendous social turmoil, due to the dislocation of rural folks and manual factory workers. This turmoil was characterized by massive urbanization and widespread urban poverty. But as the systems of capitalism and mechanical

manufacturing stabilized, fabulous wealth and material welfare came to be. Thus, capitalism and the industrial revolution, gave modernity the distinctive cast of faith in constant material progress, the belief that the future will always be economically better than the present, the compulsion for power and control, as well as the frugal way of life.

Another group of significant historical events consists of the French Revolution and the rational systematization of bureaucracy and judiciary. The French Revolution not only marks the rise of modern democracy, but the emergence of the modern nation states as well. If science and technology rationally systematized modern knowledge and work, and if capitalism rationally systematized the modern economy, modern bureaucracy and modern judiciary rationally systematized public and private management, and the litigation process. These events gave modernity the following distinctive cast: belief and faith in the nation state, a fervent nationalism, belief and faith in bureaucracy and the judiciary, and the compulsion for power and control.

Aside from these dramatic things, in the more abstract world of philosophy there were subtle historical events that equally contributed in giving modernity its distinctive cast. Rene Descartes' idea of the self as fully self-conscious, fallible but nonetheless capable of attaining truth through methodic reason became the paradigm of the modern self. Johann Gottlieb Fichte's work on the elaboration of the German national consciousness justified and reinforced modernity's faith and belief on the nation state as well as its fervent nationalism. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's work on the grand evolution of culture and consciousness justified and reinforced modernity's faith on constant progress. While Karl Marx's work on class struggle, which was aimed towards a more humane society, emphasized modernity's ideals on power and control.

Modernism

Modernism is a self-conscious cultural movement that occurred rather late within the period of modernity. If modernity started in the 13th century, modernism only emerged in the late 19th century, and is visible only in the arts, particularly in painting, literature and architecture. In painting and literature, modernism is a reaction against the then dominant aesthetics of realism, while in architecture it is a reaction against the elaborate and ornate neo-classical aesthetics.

In painting, the classicism and neo-classicism of the Renaissance that attempted to mimic reality as closely as possible were abandoned in favor of the stylized, simplified, much flattened, and progressively non-realistic aesthetics of Impressionism, Surrealism, Cubism and Expressionism. Some of the leading figures here are Auguste Renoir, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picaso, and Edvard Munch.

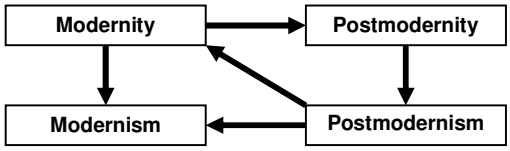
In literature, the realist narrative is abandoned in favor of impressionism, subjectivism and sensationism. The well structured plot was transformed into a branching complex that defied the linear arrow of time. Some of the leading

figures here are Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marcel Proust, Stephane Mallarme, Franz Kafka, and Rainer Maria Rilke.

In architecture the colonnades, arches, domes and other embellishment of neo-classicism were all banished. What emerged was an austere right-angular, box-typed structure of concrete, steel and glass. In modernist architecture form follows function. Some of the leading figures here are Charles Edouard Jeannerret (a.k.a, "Le Corbusier"), Walter Adolph Gropius, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

THE POSTMODERN

Theorists, critics and historians often claim that the postmodern is both a logical development, and a reaction against, the modern. This rather complicated assertion can be made more coherent when we state that postmodernity is a logical development of modernity, while postmodernism is a reaction against modernism, as well as some of the distinctive cast of modernity. The following diagram elucidates this complex relationship.



Postmodernity

Postmodernity is a historical period that spans less than century, starting from the second half of the 20th century and persisting up to the present. Similarly, there are a number of historical events in postmodernity that gave the period its distinctive outlook and way of life.

The first group of these events consists of the transformation of the original capitalism into multinational and consumer capitalism, and the harnessing of nuclear energy. These gave postmodernity even more wealth and material welfare as well as tremendous energy source to sustain a consumerist and extravagant way of life that contrasts sharply with the frugality and restraint of the way of life of modernity.

Another group of these events consists of the proliferation of the mass media, the development of the electronic technology, and the establishment of the global network of the world wide web. These resulted to the rapid and continuous interchange of information, knowledge and culture, that subsequently created postmodernity's global village phenomenon.

Another group of these events consists of the transcontinental air transit, multiculturalism. These brought about the collapse of cultural and national boundaries, that did not only reinforced the global village phenonmenon but also

contrasted sharply with modernity's faith and belief on the nation state as well as its fervent nationalism.

Still another group of these events consists of the emergence and proliferation of advocacy movements, such as feminism, environmentalism, gay rights, and anti-war activisms. These mark postmodernity's reaction against the hegemonies of patriarchy, of science and technology, and of other forms of totalitarianism.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a self-conscious cultural movement that occurred in the period of postmodernity. If postmodernity started in the second half of the 20th century, postmodernism began to take shape approximately a quarter of a century after. Unlike modernism, postmodernism is not confined to the arts but is a more broad movement in the advertising, anthropology, architecture, art, business, film, information and communication technology, literature, marketing, music, political science, philosophy, photography, sociology and many others.

In painting, the sobriety, restraint, and loftiness of modernist art was challenged by the playfulness, and everydayness of postmodernist painting. Marcel Duchamp, for example, expounded on the collage of found items in his Dada movement. Andy Warhol propagated the popular portraits in screaming colors. But others moved back to photography, that caused a crisis in painting prior to the emergence of modernism, Richard D este worked on photorealism, and others moved backed to the realism of neo-classism.

In literature, the impressionism, subjectivity and sensationism of modernism were explored further. But if modernism mourned over the fragmentation of existence, postmodernism takes this as a given and even celebrates over it as it celebrates over provisionality and incoherence. Some of the leading figures here are Vladimir Nabokov, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, and Salman Rushdie.

In architecture, the austere and restrained modern structure was replaced by wit ornamentation and references. Neo-eclectism and the use of non-orthogonal angles and unusual surfaces. The leading names are Robert Venturi, Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, Helmut Jahn and Frank Gehry.

POSTMODERNIST PHILOSOPHY

One of the differences between modernism and postmodernism is that the latter has a philosophical movement that thoroughly critiqued modernity, modernism, postmodernity, and even some elements of postmodernism, as well as theorized and articulated further both postmodernity and postmodernism. Whereas there are philosophies in modernity, we can hardly talk about modernist philosophies. In postmodern, there are both philosophies in postmodernity as

well as postmodernist ones. These postmodern philosophies in return gave impetus to the other cultural fields to pursue the postmodern cast and way of life.

In the following sub-sections we are going to examine the thoughts of some of the leading postmodernist philosophers.

Michel Foucault

The French philosopher, historian, psychologist, political and gay activist, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) may be called a postmodern philosopher, although he himself was never comfortable with the label, for at least two good reasons. First, much of his works are critiques of modernity's compulsion to control, normalize, or standardize, the human subjects, at the expense of these human subjects' individualities. Second, much of his works are also intended to expose the frail foundations of modernity's systems of knowledge, such as science, ideologies, moralities, and even common sense.

Foucault's critique of the modernity's compulsion for the control, normalization, and standardization of the human subject stems from his observation on how the ruling classes' values and cultures have stifled the ways of life of the marginalized people, such as the workers, the poor, the homosexual, the colored, and those who are in prison. He notes that modernity has a subtle way of imposing the ruling classes' values and culture on the rest of humanity through its technologies of observation, description and classification that are practiced in homes, schools, hospitals, factories, offices and prisons. These technologies of surveillance make the authorities, such as the parents, the educators, the doctors, the supervisors, and wardens, observe and evaluate the individual human subjects as to whether they satisfactorily meet certain standards and norms. Those who pass the evaluation are rewarded, while those who fail are either reformed or punished.

Modernity's technologies of surveillance are so effective, that the modern individual human subjects themselves have taken on the tasks of self-observation, self-description, and self-evaluation. The modern man has become so conscious of the all-seeing gaze of the authorities, such that whether the gaze is actually there or not, the modern acts as if he is constantly watched. This phenomenon would be similar to the behavior of a person inside a room who is informed that room is rigged with hidden cameras. Whether or not there are actually hidden cameras, the person would behave properly. A child in school, or a worker in a factory, who is constantly reminded that authorities are watching his/her every move would try to behave properly all of the time.

Foucault argues that although modernity's technologies of surveillance might be effective in weeding out social "misfits," they also weed out the other non-misfits who happen to be merely different from what the authorities thought of as normal, or standard individuals. Often, from the ranks of these other non-misfits that are earmarked for weeding out, could come geniuses, such as the likes of Einstein, Edison, Nietzsche, or van Gogh.

Foucault's exposition of the frail foundations of the modernity's systems of knowledge disables the previously taken-for-granted objectivity and reliability of such bodies as science, laws, moralities, tradition and common sense. In the early modern times, the British philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626), famously stated "knowledge is power." With this dictum he meant that a person who possesses knowledge possesses power over nature and over other persons. Foucault modifies Bacon's dictum by stressing that knowledge and power are never separate. The quest for knowledge is already motivated by a quest for power. Furthermore, it is the powerful who dictates what should be known and what should not be known, as well as what can be known and what cannot be known. Furthermore still, the knowledge generated by the powerful would make the powerful even more powerful, and consequently even more capable of generating more knowledges. Thus, Foucault demonstrated that knowledge is never objective, reliable, and neutral, but is something generated in accordance to the desires of the powerful, only to be used as a tool for the domination and subjugation of the less powerful.

Jacques Derrida

Like Foucault, the Algerian-born, French philosopher, literary critic, and political activist, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), also aimed his thoughts against modernity. Derrida earned his title of being a postmodern philosopher with his theory of language as well as with his critical methodology that crunches through the heart of the modernist ideals of objectivity and coherence.

Derrida's theory of language dismantles the then dominant structuralist theory that neatly claims that a word, or a sign, is made up of a signifier (such as the word *cat*) and a signified (such as the mental concept of a cat). Derrida proposes that a signifier does not necessarily refer to a single signified, but could instead refer to other signifiers which in return could refer to other signifiers. Take for example the following conversation between an inquisitive child and a patient adult:

> Child: What is a ***school***?
> Adult: A ***school*** is where teachers educate children.
> Child: What does ***educate*** mean?
> Adult: ***To educate*** means to provide the children with knowledge.
> Child: What is ***knowledge***?
> Adult: ***Knowledge*** is that stock of learning and skills that we all need for life?
> Child: What is ***life***? . . . .

If the child persists in his inquisitiveness, if the adult carries on with his patience, and if the two of them are not interrupted by fatigue, boredom or any other situation, the process of questioning can theoretically go on and on. In their conversation, the signifier *school* is not linked immediately to a mental concept of a school. Instead it is linked to a chain of other signifiers, *education*, *knowledge*, *life*, that is potentially endless. For the inquisitive child, the clear and accurate meaning of the word *school* is suspended until he grasps the meanings of the

other signifiers linked to it. Thus, in Derrida's theory of language, instead of the structuralist's pair of signifier and signified, what is there is an infinitely stretching chain of signifiers.

For Derrida, a word, or a sign, does not connect us to the secure and solid ground of the thing being referred to. Words, or signs, therefore, are not stable, but are like a shifting terrain, or a flickering candlelight, or a set of footprints on a sandy beach. Behind each word, or sign, is not a tangible thing being referred to, but traces of other signs, some of which are present while others are absent.

Derrida's theory of language is the basis of his more famous critical methodology, the deconstruction. Having established that words, or signs, are shifting, flickering, and ephemeral traces, he argues that any text that is built with these writhing signs would logically end up as a wobbling and tottering structure. Deconstruction is a method of dissecting a text in order to unearth its deep-seated contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambivalence. It is a method of showing how a text fails from its very own internal criteria. When Plato, for example, argued on the supremacy of speech over writing, he contradicted himself by citing that speech is supreme because it is like writing on the listener's soul. When Ernest Hemingway stated that bullfighting is not a sport but a tragedy, he does so by treating bullfighting as something analogous to American sports.

Jean-Francois Lyotard

If Foucault and Derrida commented negatively on some aspects of modernity, the French philosopher, literary and cultural critic, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), examines postmodernity with kinder eyes. Lyotard accepts the label postmodernist philosopher without any hesitation and even devoted himself to the mapping and articulation of what the postmodern world is all about. Aside from his pioneering studies of postmodern art, film, music, time, space, cityscape, and politics, he is well known for his investigation on the status of knowledge in the postmodern society.

Lyotard's analysis of postmodern knowledge may be encapsulated in at least three statements. First, knowledge has ceased to be a human value in itself and has become a commodity to be stored, sold, and utilized for the pursuit of some other ends, such as quest for power. Second, the postmodern world has become more and more tolerant to the proliferation of competing knowledges. Third, the postmodern world has become suspicious towards knowledges that claim the status of a meta-narrative or grand narrative.

Lyotard notes that in the postmodern world, knowledge is no longer pursued for its own sake, but is generated and exchanged just like any other commodity. Bodies of knowledge that cannot be commodified are gradually abandoned. Truth is no longer the supreme criteria of knowledge, but utility and marketability. Postmodern people are less interested with the question "is this true?" than they are with the questions "is this useful?" or "is this marketable?" This commodification of knowledge, Lyotard predicts, will have an astounding

impact on education. In the near future, education as we know it, where the youth is systematically immersed in the tradition of humanistic knowledge, will give way to a more economical and more pragmatic piecemeal education, where adults are trained with modules for whatever specific information they need for their specific jobs.

Lyotard appropriates the idea of language game by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Wittgenstein's language game theory is all about the principle that there are not universal rules for language, nor universal definitions for words. Wittgenstein stresses that rules and definitions depend on the specific context, or game, in which a language, or word, is used. Science is a language game that is separate and autonomous from other language games such as religion, or poetry, or morality. Wittgenstein warns us of the human tendency to use the rules and definitions of one language game in evaluating another language game. Just as we do not play basketball using the rules of baseball, we should not evaluate religion, for instance, with the rules and definitions of science, or of poetry. Language games are autonomous from each other, and should be played and appreciated using their proper and specific rules and definitions. Lyotard uses Wittgenstein's language game theory in explaining the postmodern tolerance for the proliferation of the often competing systems of knowledge. The postmodern person has learned to see these knowledges as if they are language games that come with their own specific rules and definitions. The postmodern person has learned to respect the autonomy of these knowledges from each other. The postmodern person has learned not to extract the rules and definitions from one system of knowledge and use them to evaluate the other systems of knowledge. In this manner, the postmodern world has become tolerant to the proliferation of often competing systems of knowledge.

A logical implication of Lyotard's Wittgensteinian explanation of postmodern tolerance, is the postmodern suspicion and abhorrence against systems of knowledge whose rules and definitions spill out into the other systems of knowledge. Lyotard calls these pretentious systems of knowledge *meta-narratives*, or *grand narratives*. More specifically, a *meta-narrative*, or a *grand narrative*, is a system of knowledge that claims to be universally valid and capable of evaluating the other "lesser" systems of knowledge. Lyotard considers science, religion, as well as many aspects of philosophy and ideology, as meta-narratives. Ideas like, history is progress, science can know everything, absolute freedom is attainable, and classless society is a possibility, are examples of overly huge chunks of narrative that lend credibility and legitimacy to other "lesser" narratives. But the postmodern world tends to disbelieve such grand narratives, and instead prefer the several micro-narratives whose claims to validity are merely provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative. By replacing the grand narratives with micro-narratives, the postmodern world affirms the diversity and incompatibility of humanity's ideals and desires. In this sense, the postmodern suspicion and abhorrence to the meta-narratives are just the other side of its tolerance for the abundant micro-narratives.

Jean Baudrillard

If Lyotard had the tendency to celebrate the status of postmodern knowledge, the French philosopher, sociologist, cultural and media critic, Jean Baudrillard (born 1929), is set to unveil some of postmodernity's darker sides.

Baudrillard focuses his critique on postmodernity's obsession for consumption. For him, the main reason why the postmodern person has become an insatiable consumer is the fact that he/she has transformed from a consumer of goods into a consumer of signs. The frugal modern person consumes goods, but the extravagant postmodern person consumes signs. In the postmodern age, Baurdrillard explains, goods are not anymore consumed mainly for their values and utilities. Rather, they are consumed for their prestige symbol. Thus, they are no longer goods as such, but signs of prestige. For example, a man who buys an expensive watch is not merely buying a useful time-telling device, but more so a prestige symbol that is inscribed on the expensive watch. Such a prestige symbol will make the man feel good and powerful, specially when he compares himself with the other people around him whose watches happen to be cheaper.

One of the crucial differences between consuming the goods' values and utility, and consuming the goods' inscribed prestige symbol, is that the former satiates, while the latter does not. The man who bought a watch for its value and utility as a time-telling device will not be in need of another watch as long as his watch works. As long as the man's need for a watch is concerned, he is satiated. But another man who bought a watch for its prestige symbol will be in need of a new watch the moment he discovers that his watch is no longer as prestigious, or the moment he discovers that other people are wearing more expensive watches than his. This man's need for a watch is not satiated. Baudrillard traces the postmodern obsession for consumption to the insatiable nature of the consumption of signs.

In postmodernity, consumption has become the main organizing principle of society. Individuals achieve their identities through the prestige symbols that they consume. Individuals insert themselves into the social structure through the caliber of prestige symbols that they can afford to consume. According to Baudrillard, this postmodern culture of consumption of signs is sustained and intensified by advertising and mass media.

The cultural practices of advertising and mass media have sustained and intensified consumption not only through its more direct way of suggesting to people some false needs, but more so through propagating the culture of spectacle, wherein people indulge in the pleasures of looking at images. The postmodern spectacle is constituted by images that do not have actual references in the real world. Take a photo-spread of lady in swimwear from a fashion magazine, for example, which is pleasurable to gaze on. The process of creating such a spectacular image, however, had been long and tedious, that could include requiring the model to loose some weight, applying oil on her body, spray-tanning her skin, controlling the studio lights, daubing the camera lens with petroleum jelly, and digitally editing the initial prints. In other words, there is no actual lady who is the reference of the spectacularly beautiful lady in the photo-

spread. Like Derrida's sign, which is a sign of sign of a sign and so on, Baudrillard's spectacular image is an image of an image of an image and so on.

But the technologically produced and enhanced postmodern spectacles are effective in seducing the postmodern persons. Baudrillard calls the world of the spectacular images *hyper-reality*. An image becomes hyper-real when postmodern people considers it even more real than the real. For instance, when the photo-spread of a lady in swimwear, which is a technologically created image, becomes the standard against which actual ladies in swimwear are judged and evaluated. Instead of the images imitating the real, in the postmodern world, it is the real that imitates the image. When a postmodern person embarks on a quest for the hyper-real, he/she embarks on a quest for endless consumption. When a girl decides to transform herself to the likeness of an extensively processed and edited photograph of a super-model, an endless list of things to do and buy awaits for her.

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