

Modernism and Postmodernism: The Dysfunctional Family

This paper aims to explore distinctions between the academic concepts of modernism and postmodernism through the identification of their proliferation, validity and contrasting critiques. An analogy of their relationship can be that of a dysfunctional family - they share common attributes, however, define themselves and the other from their own limited and reactionary perspective.

At the turn of the twentieth century there were more innovations occurring in the arts, science, politics and culture than ever before in history (Wheale 1995; Hughes 1991). In fact the world had changed "less since the time of Jesus Christ" than in the three decades from 1880-1910 (Peguy 1913). Emerging from this period of growth and discovery "was the sense of an accelerated rate of change in all areas of human discourse" (Hughes 1991).

Modernism was largely concerned with the 'avant-garde,' which literally means the front line, "a detachment which moves in front...but remains ahead only to pave the way" (Bauman 1997). Significant thought during the modernist period sided with grand-narratives such as Marxism or The Enlightenment. There were many, questionably misguided, noble causes believing that limitless progress in knowledge and liberty would lead toward "a good ethico-political end - universal peace" (Lyotard 1984, xxiii; Ian Hamilton Grant 2002, p29). Another distinguishing feature of modernism is the rejection of the past and its opposition of tradition (Baudrillard 1987, p63); the notion that its sole use is to be broken and that the "frontiers are there to be transgressed" (Bauman 1997).

"What has our culture lost in 1980 that the avant-garde had in 1890? Ebullience, idealism, confidence, the belief that there was plenty of territory to explore, and above all the sense that art, in the most disinterested and noble way, could find the necessary metaphors by which a radically changing culture could be explained to its inhabitants" (Hughes 1991, p9)

After World War II, it became clear that not all technical innovation is good. Loss of credibility in meta-narratives, flaws in modernist concepts and failed implementation of modernist theories led to

the demise of the modernist world view (Lyotard 1979). Modernist art excluded mass culture, dividing the public into two separated classes split between those that “understand” their art and those that do not (Bauman 1997, p98). Art was becoming so farfetched for popular adoption. The blank canvas (Theobald), empty New York gallery (Yves Klein), hole dug in the ground (Walter de Maria), silent compositions (John Cage) or the “empty pages of unwritten poems,” exemplified modernist art without a fathomable direction of where to go next and as a “permanent revolution of self-destruction” (ibid, p100). The elements on which modernist art prided itself, including provocation, scandal and violation of previous artistic convention, meant “for many people they were unrecognizable as a painting” (Wheale 1995). Accommodating artists might compensate with an accompanying plaque or even essay explaining the piece.

“By its [avant-garde] point of view, all that is left to us is to become post-moderns” (Williams 1989)

In essence, as an entire solid progressing concept, modernism becomes impossible to accurately pursue. Modernity evolves “more like a period room in a museum, a historical space that we can enter, look at, but no longer be a part of” (Hughes 1991, p17). It is now impossible to be considered an authentic modernist, especially in art or architecture, because any attempts to engage with modernist styles or techniques would be considered a bricolage or appropriation (Jenks 1987, p7). Art became a commodity when “slum landlords transformed themselves into respectable figures by buying into the realm of culture” even when they personally did not understand it, or find it attractive (Trodd 2002, p93).

“Postmodernism, therefore, was one result of the cultural crisis of modernism” (Charles 1995, p63)

In retrospect we see that the idealistic avant-garde did not anticipate its future. It had modern intentions that led to “inescapable” postmodern consequences (Bauman 1997, p100). Postmodernism, first coined in 1945 with Joseph Hudnet’s “the post-modern house” and later elaborated in academic theory, essentially has a double meaning: “the continuation of modernism and its transcendence” (Jencks 1987, p19). This allowed contemporary art to be accepted as both “fashionable and profitable” which differed from its modernist predecessors who measured success “by their exclusion from museums” (Charles 1995, p91).

However, the break from modernism to postmodernism becomes hard to define because the “post” comes after a poorly defined modernism: Nigel Wheale makes a point that due to the variety of transformation in art, science and culture in the early 20th century “categorizing it as a single phenomenon is unhelpful” (1995, p27). He also notes that a significant reason that there is such a variety of broad definitions for postmodernism “stems from the difficulty of defining its precursor” (p15).

Postmodernism, stands in stark contrast since it values the past to learn from and for inspiration. The idea that “every good idea had clearly already been had” (Charles 1995, p92) gave an opening for the continuation, adoption, extension and combination of an old idea with something else, thus creating something new with the acceptance that the modernist notion of individualisation is “a thing of the past” (Jameson 1983, p115).

A key transition in the adoption of postmodernism was the transition of the concepts from the arts to philosophy and politics (Grant 2002, p28). Postmodernism was the result of battles between cultural grand-narratives, “where there was unity...now there are only differences...now fragmented groups struggle in short-term struggles” (ibid, p30). Postmodernism embraces a variety of characteristics including embellishment, irony, eclecticism, fragmentation, intertextuality, appropriation, representation, mediation, self-reflexivity, multiple levels of meaning, siding with popular culture, media as inspiration, emphasis on signs and superficiality. All of these characteristics are largely a result of an acceptance that, to a degree, “everything has already been said [or done] before” (Eco 2007).

Postmodernism, as defined by Stuart Sim, is “rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries” (2002, vii). However, due to its very nature postmodernism is certainly not without its critics and many of its concepts are “not widely accepted or even understood” (Jameson 1983, p111). This is largely due to the fact that most of the postmodern manifestations have emerged specifically as a reaction to the inadequate and extremist manifestations of high modernism (ibid).

“Postmodernism is aimless, anarchic, amorphous, self-indulgent, inclusive, horizontally structured, and aims for the popular” (Bannard 1983)

Criticisms of postmodernism are largely rooted in the notions of a perpetual present, identity confusion, proliferation of problems, commitment to difference and a rejection of innate human dignity or rights. According to Jameson’s notion of the perpetual present, if one is to live a postmodern existence it is one of isolation, disconnection and discontinuity (1983, p119). Although

postmodernism encourages new, multi-perspective alternatives, “postmodern difference seems to give with one hand what it takes with the other” (Grant, 2002, p32). Postmodern politics and philosophy face problems when trying to address serious cultural issues such as racism, sexism, religious and political persecution, education, unemployment or terrorism as the prospect of solving them is “given up in advance by...renounc[ing] the modern ideals of universal freedom, equality and rights, without proposing any alternatives” (ibid, p28).

Postmodernism, just like its predecessor, is hardly a unified collection of theories. However, Richard Rorty separates postmodern thinking into two main groups: “Kantians” that believe in innate human dignity and rights; and “Hegelians” that claim ‘humanity’ is a “biological rather than a moral notion” and therefore both dignity and rights are relative only to a community to which a person claims to belong (1993, p323).

“an absolute does exist: every person lives in a body that cannot be owned because nothing was done to acquire it and nothing (besides suicide) can be done to be rid of it...our bodies and their subsequent deaths are now an absolute around which humankind can focus its actions” (Eagleton 2003)

Eagleton also makes a good point about the process of the “putting of the complex into the simple” and how it cannot be constructive because simple is not “an adequate medium of such complexity” (1986). Neither modernism nor postmodernism, are simple concepts. They are also not complete or unified - the process of applying or ‘authentically’ problematising them becomes impossible.

Postmodern theory allows greater insight into the complexity of humanity, perspective and ideology. However, this can come at the cost of an infinity of problems because more differences are found in mankind in the process of problematising of communities, identity and unity. A reflection on society as postmodern is only possible because the broad nature of its definition, this makes it academically irrefutable if problematised from within its own framework.

“That narratives are discredited and fragmented is no reason to assume that they need always be so. This merely poses us a problem that we must direct our efforts towards solving” (Grant 2002, p33)

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