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Post-Modernism & Modernism

The 20th century's "Crisis of Modernity" has given rise to post-modernist theory that rejects the value of narratives, yet it is only through the rediscovery of modernist narratives that humanity can move safely into the 21st century. "Modernity," as coined by the French art critic Charles Baudelaire, was the final segment of the millennia-long grand narrative of social development that transformed western society from agricultural, religious, and feudal to industrial, secular, and democratic. Its origins can be traced to the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries, during which technological innovations like the printing press began to wrest the power of ideas from the theocratic authorities and hand them to the larger public (Appadurai 28). New frontiers in art, culture, and independent thought mirrored the new frontiers discovered at the far ends of the world. Organizations like the Dutch East India company represented a rising merchant class that inaugurated the inexorable shift of economic power from the state to the corporation. The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries followed suit, developing theories of science, secular humanism, and equality among Europe's educated elite. These radical ideas would soon manifest in America, which saw the birth of the first democratic nation since antiquity.

Modernity would become be the apex of this narrative, inhabited by the values of secularism, reason, and egalitarianism while introducing the global industrialization of

capitalism. From the 19th century through roughly the fall of the U.S.S.R., modernity held sway as the dominant ideology of Euro-American, western civilization. Its beating heart was the relentless pursuit of capital in all corners of society, driving all human progress and activity forward. Within its soul was the conviction that the world and its inhabitants could be “improved” upon, if only mankind, for it was most often men, used the tools of reason, technological progress, and market economics in reshaping all aspects of society (“The Nature of Modernity”).

In the art world, the vibrant dynamism of Futurists and the streamlined beauty of Art Deco celebrated the possibilities of industry. The Keynesian and Austrian schools of economics clashed over the role of government and the individual in shaping global markets. Sigmund Freud and his disciples attempted to uncover the mysteries of the mind, mapping rational interpretations of the admittedly irrational unconscious. Human sexuality, although bound by conservative Victorian Era mores, improved contraceptive practices and slowly moved towards a more tolerant plurality of orientations. Mass production and consumerism increased personal ownership and quality of life.

But it is in the realm of science and technology that the boldest strides were made. Innumerable achievements like the development of antibiotics, the moon landing, the development of mass production, and the mastery of the atom pushed the ever-expanding boundaries of what was once thought possible. In the United States, quality of life improved dramatically in every quantifiable way during the modernity-ruled 20th century. Literacy, infant mortality, personal wealth, and human rights all improved for the ordinary citizen, while the average life expectancy rose from 46 to an astonishing 78 years (“Data, The United States”). In these ways and more, modernity delivered on its

promises for a better way of life.

One of modernity's most distinguishing features was its reliance on grand narratives. Although a secular ideology, this use of narratives was inherited from the self-reinforcing mythologies of the western religious paradigm that it replaced. Technological wonders, cultural milestones, medical breakthroughs, victories over oppression, and liberation of the human spirit were all framed as hallowed but inevitable steps in the unending march to utopia. All of modernity was set against a backdrop of constant and unpredictable flux, with each new challenge an opportunity for growth and advancement. Under this seductive narrative, there would be no scientific mystery that could not be solved, no social ill that could not be fixed, and person that would be deprived of a comfortable and rewarding life. All that was required was for the individual to contribute his labor to the larger economic machinery, with the knowledge that they would be paid back in kind ("The Nature of Modernity").

However, by the middle of the 20th century, it was clear that a "Crisis of Modernity" was developing. Despite modernity's pretensions of liberation and elevation for all humanity, humanity still held the capacity for inflicting horrors on a scale and scope that undermined the Enlightenment ideals they purported to value. The industrial foundation that launched modernity in the late 19th century was built upon foreign and domestic labor exploitation, bolstered by savage methods of social control. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 illustrated the devastating consequences of 20th century technology meeting 19th century beliefs about the generational inevitability of war. Over eight million would perish in the four year conflict, some in battles that claimed tens of thousands of lives in a single hour ("World War 1 Casualty Rates"). Twenty years later,

the world's major powers would clash again in World War II, an even more terrible conflict that claimed between 60 and 85 million lives ("Second World War"). In the east-west Cold War that followed, traditional imperialism would evolve into adventurism and the support of client states, as both sides provided military and financial backing to despots in Iraq, Indonesia, Chile, Egypt, and Iran, among other nations.

And yet, nothing would come to embody the Crisis of Modernity, of man's inhumanity to man, like Auschwitz. Just one of the dozens of Nazi concentration camps, it became shorthand for the Reich's systematic extermination of between 10 and 11 million Jews, Roma, and other "undesirables." With advanced logistics, industrial efficiency, and medical acumen, Auschwitz was a perversion of modernity that used technology and grand narratives, in this case, the rise of a supreme Aryan nation, to perpetrate atrocities on a scale unprecedented in history. That the civilizing nature of the Enlightenment did not deter such aberration was unsettling. Even more horrific was the possibility raised by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman that, "the Holocaust was not the antithesis of modern civilization and everything- or so we like to think- it stands for... (it) could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire. And that the two faces are perfectly comfortably attached to the same body" (Bauman 7).

A second issue in the "Crisis of Modernity" is sustainability. The economic power of capitalist modernity requires steady growth and mass consumption, with the constant rollout of new commodities dovetailing with the planned obsolescence of the old. For the consuming public, these commodities are intended to provide the temptation of satisfaction without ever quite delivering (Adorno and Horkheimer 55). Applied on a

global scale, this is the bedrock principal of capitalism that drives employment, the flow of wealth, economic power, and social stability. And, indeed, there has been growth. From the year 1900 to 2010, the global population has exploded from roughly a billion and a half to seven billion (“World Population”). So too has it brought evidence that the planet’s carrying capacity and biosphere cannot sustain the numbers or ambitions brought to bear by modernity’s global influence. The fossil fuels, fresh water, minerals, and agricultural yields upon which the modern world is built are not without limit, and will inevitably become exhausted. Were this not problematic enough, the burning of fossil fuels has brought about global warming, threatening an ominous future of super-storms, mass extinction, starvation, and resource wars (“The Crisis of Modernity”).

Modernity’s central paradox is that an economic system based on finite resources must somehow deliver unlimited growth, but the pursuit of said growth has created conditions that endanger the human race. And yet, nearly 20% of humanity lives in the most extreme poverty, far removed from the benefits of the modern world (“Why Ending Extreme Poverty Isn’t Good Enough”). To deny them inclusion into the modern world will stunt the growth modernity requires and betray the Enlightenment humanism that it claims to represent. Many struggle with the question as to whether modernity can be a balance between growth and sustainability. For others, there is post-modernism.

Post-modernity arose in the west as a reaction to the many disappointments of modernity, the wars, the poverty, the resource depletion, and the impossibility of its utopian promises, although not necessarily as a solution to them. While there are a variety of definitions for the term, post-modernity is generally agreed upon to have seen its inception anywhere from the 1960s to the end of the Cold War. Post-modernism, the

manifestation of post-modernity on culture and the arts, finds its earliest seeds in the Dadists of the 1920s, suggesting the role that the arts have played in anticipating and interpreting modernity's contradictions (Harvey 42).

Unlike its predecessor, post-modernity is notable in that it has no overarching theory, and its exact meaning can vary depend on its application. Binary systems like good/evil, Capitalism/Marxism, and Freedom/Autocracy are rejected in favor of more complex and amorphous arrangements; or, lack of arrangements. Literary theorist Ihab Hassan identified numerous core ideas and metaphors that remain constant in its relationship to modernity. If modernity is hierarchy, centering or type, then post-modernity is anarchy, dispersal, and mutant. If modernity is art symbolism pregnant with meaning, then post-modernity is the Dada movement's irrationality. British sociologist David Harvey summarized a major theme, believing the most startling fact about post-modernism to be, "its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic... Post-modernity swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary currents as if that is all that there is" (44).

Or, as Jean-Francois Lyotard stated, "I define the post-modern as incredulity towards meta-narratives." The French philosopher Michel Foucault concurred, arguing that local, class, and state dynamics were reducible down to the body, where all repression was psychologically internalized. It was the individual who determined the system of power, not grand narratives from up on high. Likewise, freedom could only come from the individual, empowered by the mastery of their own psychology and bodies. Utopian liberation ideologies like Marxism would inevitably end in oppressive systems like the Soviet Union (45).

Thus, the “grand narrative” of post-modern thought is a disregard for grand narratives entirely. The philosophical proving grounds of the arts would introduce a host of new authors, directors, and artists to challenge traditional modernist ideas of storytelling and truth on a micro scale. In many of these works, the goal was to use post-modernism to show that the world was far more complex and chaotic than the utopian schemes of modernity could ever hope to wrangle or anticipate. In Thomas Pynchon’s 1973 novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*, over 400 characters move through dozens of interconnected and isolated storylines to both satirize and deconstruct the “war novel” and show the impossibly convoluted world emerging from World War II. The overall journey, if one can be said to exist, is an unraveling of reality rather than a construction of one. In David Lynch’s 1986 film *Blue Velvet*, the classic motifs of 1950s Americana are inverted, turning them into a veneer for a world of perversion and madness hidden beneath. As the film progresses, it becomes unclear which world is real and which is the fantasy (Harvey 48).

In Alan Moore’s watershed 1986 graphic novel *Watchmen*, classic superhero tropes are frustrated and disassembled, challenging the reader to question what is most appealing about the genre: the explicit exhortations to selfless heroism, or the implicit appeals to indulgent power worship. Quentin Tarantino, one of the most influential post-modernist filmmakers of the 1990s, filled his 1994 opus *Pulp Fiction* with non-linear pacing, morally ambiguous characters, and countless references to classic cinema. Embedded within these works, and most other expressions of post-modernism, is the importance of intertextuality and the conviction that there are no new significant ideas. All that remains is the deconstruction of what has already been, that we may better

understand the chaos of modern life. Or, more accurately, understand that modern life is chaos.

This breakdown of grand narratives carries deeper implications for the larger world beyond the arts. The development of the medical sciences, for example, stems from that most ancient of proto-humanist meta-narratives, the Hippocratic Oath. The responsibility of the healer to protect his patient, and to keep their discipline strictly neutral in the field of battle, is one of the most sacred, secular narratives of western thought. The breakdown of this narrative, the detachment of medical science from morality, creates a world where the tantalizing limits of what should be done hold no bearing on what can be done (Ayelsworth). And so comes Mustard Gas, Zyklon B, weaponized anthrax, and advanced methods of physical and psychological torture. The knowledge of the healer becomes not a tool for mercy but for brutalization and power. In some respects, the gas chambers and gruesome medical experiments of Auschwitz were not simply a failure of modernism but perversely an act of post-modernism. Yet if it is decided that these horrors belong squarely at the feet of modernity and its failings, it must be acknowledged that post-modernity offers no philosophical alternative. While its deconstruction of grand narratives provides valuable insights into their workings, it offers no alternative upon which to build or solve the problems of a society.

In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, the Marxist Slavoj Zizek highlights this weakness, writing that, “The only way to grasp the true novelty of the ‘New’ is to analyze the world through the lens of what was ‘eternal’ in the old.” (Zizek 6). Therein lies one of post-modernity’s own paradoxes: that to disregard the importance of grand or historical narratives leaves one in a state of persistent “present,” blinding one to the possibility of

encountering either the original or the repeated. Post-modernity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, unable to draw upon wisdom from the past and ill-equipped to face the challenges of its times. Through his writing, Zizek chronicles the end of the Cold War from Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" narrative to the rise of the 21st century's insulated, transnational, "ultra-high net worth" class who argues that their continued success is critical to the functioning of global society (15). The emergence of such a globalized community might seem unprecedented, but when viewed through Zizek's Marxist narrative, reality shifts to reveal a clear continuation in the dialectic struggle between the haves and the have-nots (19). While post-modernism can certainly pick apart this Marxist view as conspiratorial or impractical, it itself can offer no solutions to the growing international wealth gap. One cannot feed the starving masses with irony.

The wonders of modernity have come with a price, with a balance that has yet to fully come due. Climate change, environmental despoliation, overpopulation, nuclear proliferation, fossil fuels depletion, fresh water scarcity, the surveillance state, the wealth gap, and religious fanaticism do indeed form grand narratives which will dictate the course of the future. If humanity is to endure into the 22nd century, it will require a guiding principal that can sufficiently handle the complexities of these issues without resigning the future to chaos. An evolved modernity, a "neo-modernity," perhaps, is needed to harness the values of reason, compassion, and historical perspective that have brought it to the present. Having used post-modernity to deconstruct and examine the components that have contributed to modernity's failings, humanity must now learn from these lessons and draft a new narrative.

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