

Postmodernism

To define the indefinable

Is Postmodernism a worldview/ religion/ philosophy or a negation of these things?
Why do we need to try and understand it for our work with international students?

Three attitudes that reflect the collective mindset of a post-modern culture:

Cynicism

Contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives. **Cynical** implies having a sneering disbelief in sincerity or integrity.

Suspicion

i) The act or an instance of suspecting something wrong without proof or on slight evidence:

MISTRUST

ii) A state of mental uneasiness and uncertainty: **DOUBT**

Irony

i) Incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result
OR an event or result marked by such incongruity

ii) Incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play -- called also *dramatic irony*, *tragic irony*

WHY?? We will come back to that after we examine...

Five aspects of postmodernism:

There is no one true, objective meaningful story (worldview) that gives our individual stories (lives) meaning and significance.

“Jean-Francois Lyotard...said that postmodernism requires a **suspicion** of the overarching stories (often called ‘**metanarratives**’) that support our claims of truth.”

-Andy Crouch “What Exactly is Postmodernism” in *Christianity Today*

Metanarratives - e.g. Christianity, Enlightenment, faith in progress through science, Marxism, faith in progress through the development of multinational Capitalism

Consequently, there is no ultimate **truth** or at least none that we can access. Reality is a subjective linguistic construct; there is no connection between our individual stories and a possible nonexistent objective truth—we are trapped within our own conceptual frameworks. All stories have equal significance—we have no yardstick to measure whether one is better than another and to assume one is better than another is to be intolerant.

Example: Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run*

“The ball is round. The game lasts 90 minutes. That’s a fact. Everything else is just a theory.” Tykwer shows us three narratives (three worldviews), and we must choose which one best suits us. In this “game” of life, “religion is cafeteria style” (Christianity and Truth).

“Reality” is a language construct

In *The Universe Next Door*, Sider explains that the central concern of postmodernism is “not what is there or how we know what is there but how language functions to construct meaning itself. The truth about reality itself is forever hidden from us. All we can do is tell stories.”

Both Richard Rorty (American philosopher) and Lyotard argue that truth is something that is constructed (in language communities), not found. This coincides with Jacques Derrida's infamous view that there is no (accessible) reality outside of the text. Meaning is created only from context; therefore, there are no absolutes.

We define ourselves through the words we use to tell our stories—these words are all we have but they do not connect to some larger truth. All language is arbitrary thus our identities are collages of meaningless images and signs.

All narratives mask a play for power. Any one narrative used as a metanarrative is oppressive. (Sider)

We use language to manipulate and control. In this deeply **cynical** view, sincerity and truth are completely lost as are trust and love. Nietzsche reflected this view in his comment *"God is dead"*.

Ethics and identity are both also language constructs so "Who are we to judge?" Who can we trust?? Even "history" contains no accessible objective or "factual" truth as it is a story written by "the winners" in order to enable themselves to stay in control.

"There is no 'history' but a multiple, overlapping and interactive series of legitimate vs. excluded histories". (Michel Foucault)

History and fiction are the same thing; both are merely narratives.

Example: The Postmodern trend to focus on the marginalized. Buzzword-**TOLERANCE**. So a postmodernist view of history is not **linear** (working in a guided path, a straight line towards something) or **teleological** (Working towards an ultimate purpose) but fragmented and cyclical as they see that this sense of purpose or direction is something we impose upon "reality" and the past in order to fulfil our own agendas. Consequently, we feel as if we have been fooled and are very resentful and **suspicious**.

Why have we been fooled into believing that there is a reality, a truth that doesn't exist? Because others want to control us.

Examples, The Truman Show, The Matrix: "Welcome to the desert of the real."

If there is no ultimate real, no source of truth to give stability and meaning, then all we have are merely shifting images and signs with no stable reference points. All we see are images, attempted representations of a real that is not there.

From Jean Baudrillard's *"Simulacra and Simulations"*:

"All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference." REPRESENTATION starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent.

Phases of image:

1. It is the reflection of basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks an absence of basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

IMAGE is the only REALITY we know.

Baudrillard borrows the idea of simulacrum from Plato, who defined it as a copy of a copy of a copy. Postmodernists argue that we have constructed a virtual reality on copies—there is no ultimate origin to images, symbols, signs, nothing outside “the system”. Derrida explains this when he says that there is no “transcendental signified” to give language meaning outside of its context.

In the shifting sands of relativism...“We have lost our belief that there is any overarching story about life, any overarching meaning to life, which is true absolutely for all time for all people. Instead everything is just a matter of subjective perspective, everything is relative, depending on where you stand. Everything revolves around the world we choose or create for ourselves. There is no reality; there are only images, different images. Now if there is no objective reality then we are in a sense trapped in this situation of only being able to live in an image. We can only see the world from where we stand, from that context, that sub-culture, that language-game, that constructed reality, that image.” – Jock McGregor, L’abri Fellowship

Examples: Mtv Generation (Soundbites); Virtual Reality; Techno Music; Obsession with “Reality” TV shows, and...

Madonna (all quotations from Jock McGregor’s *“Madonna: Icon of Postmodernity”*)

“Madonna’s whole life revolves around the presentation (and evolution) of her image...She lives totally within the artificially constructed reality of the image. She has become one with her image.”

“We are always looking for the new, always moving from one image to the next, swapping one artificial world to the next...there is no true commitment but playfulness, parody irony.” “Nihilism with a smile.” Whimsical Post-modern humour is deeply cynical.

American Marxist scholar Frederic Jameson calls postmodernist culture, which he believes to be *“the last stage of capitalism”, a “depthless culture”*.

In the age of Advanced Consumer Capitalism, the prevalence of choice has rendered everything level, everything is open to you as the consumer.

In this society of power plays, we are defined chiefly as consumers. Everything is a slogan to us—everyone wants something from us. Who can we trust?

I AM NOT A TARGET MARKET—Chapter heading from Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X*.

Example: Fight Club

“Tyler taps into the frustration of young disenfranchised males, starting up underground fight clubs. At fight club, men pair off and beat each other in a cathartic release of their frustrations. Soon, Tyler is starting up fight clubs all over the country, building up a cult-like army with which he can overthrow the consumer society he so vehemently decries.

Tyler, in one of his many philosophy-laced monologues, says “We’re all raised by television to believe that one day, we’re all going to be millionaires, movie gods and rock stars... but we won’t. And we’re figuring that out now.” In the face of this society, many people feel impotent, unable to change their lives. They feel owed. And, like it or not, violence is one way to exert at least a small amount of control over the people around them, if only for a brief time.”

From <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/pre2000/fightclub.html>

A good summary of postmodern thinking is given by Os Guinness in *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*:

Where modernism was a manifesto of human self-confidence and self-congratulation, postmodernism is a confession of modesty, if not despair. There is no truth, only truths. There are no principles, only preferences. There is no grand reason, only reasons. There is no privileged civilization, only a multiple of cultures, beliefs, periods, and styles. There is no grand narrative of human progress, only countless stories of where people and their cultures are now. There is no simple reality or any grand objectivity of universal, detached knowledge, only a ceaseless representation of everything in terms of everything else. In sum, postmodernism...is an extreme form of relativism.

From Logos to the LOGOS:

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Is this really a new attitude/ philosophy?

Ecclesiastes 6:12: For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?

John 18:36

³⁶Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

³⁷"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." ³⁸"**What is truth?**" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him."

The attack on truth, meaning and language reflects a deep cultural uneasiness about the fact that our ability to communicate is reflective of our being made in God's image. He is the "real".

Genesis 1:3: And God **said**, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning-the first day..

John 1:1 ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1 ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and **truth**.

Our culture, unknowingly saturated with postmodern despair and irony, is searching for authenticity, sincerity, reality. We must be aware of its need to learn to trust, to not be treated as consumers but as individuals whose lives have meaning because they were created in God's image; He loves them enough to have died for them to offer them his TRUTH.

Surprise!!! Something both sincere and hopeful from a postmodern writer:

From Douglas Coupland's *Life After God*

220 "Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of the children of the children of the pioneers-life after God-a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven...I think there was a trade-off somewhere along the line. I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to

fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God.”

231-Julie speaking-“You know-I’m trying to escape from ironic hell: cynicism into faith; randomness into clarity; worry into devotion. But it’s hard because I try to be sincere about life and then I turn on a TV and I see a game show host and I have to throw up my hands and give up.”

289-“Now here is my secret:

I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God-that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”

*Taken from the Cambridge International
Outreach (CIO) training manual 2004*