

POSTMODERNITY: AN OVERVIEW OF BASIC CONCEPTS AND CONCERNS

The statements in your opinionnaire are some of the fundamental premises of modernity. They serve to justify and explain virtually all of our social structures and institutions, including democracy, law, science, ethics, and aesthetics.

Modernity is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function (the more rationally it will function). Because modernity is about the pursuit of ever-increasing levels of order, modern societies constantly are on guard against anything and everything labeled as "disorder," which might disrupt order. Thus modern societies rely on continually establishing a binary opposition between "order" and "disorder," so that they can assert the superiority of "order." But to do this, they have to have things that represent "disorder"—modern societies thus continually have to create/construct "disorder." In western culture, this disorder becomes "the other"—defined in relation to other binary oppositions.

The ways that modern societies go about creating categories labeled as "order" or "disorder" have to do with the effort to achieve stability. **Stability and order are maintained in modern societies through the means of "master narratives," which are stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs.** A "master narrative" in American culture might be the story that democracy is the most enlightened (rational) form of government, and that democracy can and will lead to universal human happiness. Every belief system or ideology has its grand narratives; for Marxism, for instance, the "grand narrative" is the idea that capitalism will collapse in on itself and a utopian socialist world will evolve. You might think of grand narratives as a kind of meta-theory—that is, a theory that explains a theory (as with Marxism)—or a story that is told to explain the belief systems that exist.

All aspects of modern societies, including science as the primary form of knowledge, depend on these grand narratives. **Postmodernism then is the critique of grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice.** In other words, every attempt to create "order" always demands the creation of an equal amount of "disorder," but a "grand narrative" masks the constructedness of these categories by explaining that "disorder" REALLY IS chaotic and bad, and that "order" REALLY IS rational and good. Postmodernism, in rejecting grand narratives, favors "mini-narratives," stories that explain small practices and local events rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern "mini-narratives" are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.

Another aspect of Enlightenment thought is the idea that words serve only as representations of thoughts or things, and don't have any function beyond that. Modern societies depend on the idea that signifiers (words or symbols) always point to signifieds (the REAL things those words represent), and that reality resides in signifieds. In postmodernism, however, there are only signifiers. In other words, things don't exist if they don't have a name, and since we can never really agree that the signifiers we use when we talk to each other match up to the same signifieds, it's more practical to think of language as being the only real substance—signifieds, for all practical purposes, do not exist. According to this way of thinking, the idea of any stable

or permanent reality disappears. **For postmodern societies, then, there are only surfaces, without discernable depth; only signifiers, with no stable or certain signifieds.**

Another way of saying this, according to Jean Baudrillard, is that in postmodern society there are no originals, only copies--or what he calls "simulacra." You might think, for example, about painting or sculpture, where there is an original work (by Van Gogh, for instance), and there might also be thousands of copies, but the original is the one with the highest value (particularly monetary value). **Contrast that with cds or music recordings, where there is no "original," as in painting--no recording that is hung on a wall, or kept in a vault; rather, there are only copies, by the millions, that are all the same, and all sold for (approximately) the same amount of money. This world of copies upon copies upon copies is a postmodern one.** (Note: Check your handout entitled "Chapter Two: The Vocabulary of Comics" for an illustration of this point. Another version of Baudrillard's "simulacrum" would be the concept of virtual reality, a reality created by simulation, for which there is no original. This is particularly evident in computer games/simulations--think of Sim City, World of Warcraft, etc.

Finally, postmodern societies are concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge. In modern societies, knowledge was equated with science, and was contrasted to narrative; science was good knowledge, and narrative was bad, primitive, irrational (and thus associated with women, children, primitives, and insane people). Knowledge, however, was good for its own sake; one gained knowledge, via education, in order to be knowledgeable in general, to become an educated person. This is the ideal of the liberal arts education. In a postmodern society, however, knowledge becomes functional--you learn things not to know them, but to use that knowledge. Educational policy today puts emphasis on skills and training, rather than on a vague humanist ideal of education in general. This is particularly acute for English majors. "What will you DO with your degree?"

Not only is knowledge in postmodern societies characterized by its utility, but knowledge is also distributed, stored, and arranged differently in postmodern societies than in modern ones. Specifically, the advent of electronic computer technologies has revolutionized the modes of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption in our society (indeed, some might argue that postmodernism is best described by, and correlated with, the emergence of computer technology, starting in the 1960s, as the dominant force in all aspects of social life). In postmodern societies, anything which is not able to be translated into a form recognizable and storable by a computer--i.e. anything that's not digitizable--will cease to be knowledge. In this paradigm, the opposite of "knowledge" is not "ignorance," as it is the modern/humanist paradigm, but rather "noise." Anything that doesn't qualify as a kind of knowledge is "noise," is something that is not recognizable as anything within this system.

The important question for postmodern societies is who decides what knowledge is (and what "noise" is), and who knows what needs to be decided.