From Modernity to Postmodernity: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract: This study explores the transition from modernity to postmodernity, emphasizing the profound transformations in thought, culture, and social structures. Modernity, defined by rationality, progress, and the pursuit of objective truth, has progressively given way to postmodernity, which foregrounds relativism, fragmentation, and subjectivism. The analysis examines the implications of these shifts across key domains, including epistemology, art, religion, and politics, highlighting the crisis of metanarratives and the emergence of interpretative pluralism. Additionally, the paper traces the evolution of postmodernism, from its Marxist intellectual foundations to the contemporary era of digital information, assessing its broader ramifications for communication and economic structures. Ultimately, the study argues for the necessity of balancing postmodern critique with a concurrent need for stability, thereby facilitating a nuanced engagement with the complexities of contemporary reality.

Keywords: Modernity, Postmodernity, Reason, Truth, Relativism, Subjectivism, Objectivity, Pluralism

1. Introduction

From a retrospective historical perspective, society has undergone major transformations in its worldview, shaped by significant cultural, political, and technological events. Modernity, a movement that has dominated Western thought for several centuries, was defined by the values of reason, progress, and objectivity, drawing profound influence from the Enlightenment and the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. However, the 20th century marked a significant rupture, largely driven by the horrors of the two world wars, the failures of totalitarian ideologies, and the crisis of confidence in modernity's grand narratives. Consequently, this period saw the transition to postmodernity, characterized by the rejection of objective values, cultural relativism, and a fragmented perspective on reality.

2. Modernity and Postmodernity: A Comparative Analysis

In the field of art, Cărtărescu (1999, pp. 11-20) highlights a fundamental distinction between modernism and postmodernism. While modernists, despite their emphasis on progress, upheld the aesthetic value of artistic creation as an immutable principle akin to classicism, postmodernists pay much greater attention to embedding their works into everyday life, as well as into the ethical, political, or religious dilemmas of today's world, making the aesthetic criterion, which was sacrosanct in modernism, insufficient for evaluating and valuing a work of art. This perspective reflects a radical shift in the function of art, transitioning from a purely aesthetic dimension to one that is contextualized and socially engaged.

Postman (1985, pp. 44-63) describes the modern individual through the concept of the "typographic mind," characterized by abstract, deductive, and sequential thinking, an appreciation for reason and order, an aversion to contradictions, the capacity for objective

analysis, and tolerance for delayed responses. The concept of the typographic mind refers to the way in which print technology has shaped human cognitive processes. It fosters a rational, logical, and sequential approach to information, characterized by abstract, deductive, and argumentative reasoning. The key attributes of typographic thinking include:

1. Rationality and Logic – Individuals influenced by print culture tend to structure information clearly and coherently, relying on logical arguments.
2. Critical Analysis – Reading stimulates critical thinking, enabling readers to engage with complex ideas and form independent conclusions.
3. Sequentially and Coherence – Written texts impose an orderly progression of ideas, unlike visual or digital culture, which fragments information.
4. Defense of Objective Truth – In a typographic culture, truth is associated with logical argumentation and empirical evidence, rather than emotions or subjective impressions.
5. Tolerance for Delayed Responses – Compared to the digital age, where responses are immediate, typographic thinking involves prolonged reflection and processing of information.

Postman argues that the transition from a print-dominated culture to an image-dominated one (through television and the internet) has profoundly affected how people think and interact with information, weakening analytical capacity and fostering a more superficial approach to knowledge.nIn contrast, postmodernism promotes a fragmented, subjectivist, and relativist mode of thinking, wherein truth is no longer considered absolute but rather constructed and reinterpreted according to context.

Hunt (2003, p. 189) offers a systematic comparison between the two paradigms, emphasizing their fundamental contrasts:

Modernism vs. Postmodernism

- Confidence in reason vs. inclination toward relativism
- The ideal of objectivity vs. the ideal of subjectivity
- Empirical truth vs. constructed truth
- Trust in democratic institutions vs. skepticism toward authority
- Planning vs. randomness
- Unity vs. diversity
- Progress vs. lack of a clear direction beyond nostalgia
- Future orientation vs. focus on the present moment
- Concern for depth ("educate me") vs. concern for superficiality ("entertain me").

This comparative analysis underscores the shift from a structured, reason-based worldview to one that embraces plurality, decentralization, and contextual interpretation, reflecting broader epistemological and cultural transformations.

3. The Effects of the Transition to Postmodernism on Society

The shift from modernity to postmodernity has had profound consequences on various aspects of human life. In literature, it has manifested through the abandonment of conventional narrative structures and the exploration of fragmentation and irony. In philosophy, this transition is reflected in a growing skepticism toward grand explanatory systems and a preference for interpretative pluralism. In the religious sphere, postmodernism has led to an increase in spiritual syncretism and a relativization of traditional values.

This transition is not merely a theoretical shift but also a practical transformation that is evident across multiple domains of social life. From architecture to cinema, from educational systems to interpersonal relationships, the postmodern paradigm has diversified the ways in which individuals perceive reality. While modernity was characterized by grand

narratives and epistemological certainties, postmodernity is marked by fragmentation, irony, and the continuous redefinition of identities.

Understanding this process is crucial for navigating the complexities of contemporary society, where the boundaries between truth and interpretation, between tradition and innovation, are more fluid than ever.

4. The Stages of Postmodernism's Development

Postmodernism emerged as a reaction to modernism, challenging its core values (Rotaru, 2024, pp. 301-318) and advocating for a different understanding of reality, knowledge, and culture. This ideological movement developed rapidly and assertively, seeking to entirely replace modernist paradigms. Consequently, many elements previously regarded as fundamental were restructured or even eliminated, creating a new framework for interpreting the world. Hunt illustrates this evolution by stating that the postmodern era took its first steps with cinema, began to flourish during the golden age of radio, enjoyed a happy childhood alongside television during the Cold War, and now, at the beginning of the 21st century, is experiencing the dizzying phase of adolescence (Hunt, 2003, p. 188). This observation highlights how postmodernism has evolved alongside technological progress and mass media, profoundly influencing how individuals perceive reality.

4.1. Philosophical Aspects of Postmodernism

From a philosophical perspective, we can identify four essential aspects of postmodernism:

– Epistemological and ontological skepticism: Postmodernism challenges both the methods and outcomes of the knowledge process, embracing a radical non-foundationalism. Within this context, all forms of knowledge are viewed with suspicion, and reality is considered subjective and interpretative.

– Non-realism: Postmodernism opposes realism, rejecting the idea that there is an objective correspondence between thought and the external world or between words and things. This principle aligns with what Gianni Vattimo calls "ontological hermeneutics," a perspective derived from subjective idealism (Vattimo, 1985, pp. 130-142). Ontological hermeneutics was primarily developed by Martin Heidegger, particularly in his work *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger argued that interpretation is not merely an act of textual analysis but a fundamental way through which humans experience and understand their own existence. The core principles of ontological hermeneutics include:

- Being is comprehensible only through interpretation – Human existence cannot be understood objectively but only through a continuous process of interpreting experiences.
- Understanding is always contextualized – Human beings construct meaning based on tradition, culture, and history.
- Language is the primary medium of interpretation – Heidegger asserts that language plays a crucial role in shaping reality and how being is perceived.
- The hermeneutic circle – Understanding being is not a linear process but a cyclical one, where previous interpretations influence new ones.

– Nominalism: Postmodernism promotes a specific form of nominalism that emphasizes the idea that all categories and concepts are linguistic constructs, lacking an objective essence independent of human interpretation.

– The rejection of stable self-knowledge: Postmodernism undermines the notion of a fixed personal identity, suggesting instead that the self is a continuously shifting social and cultural construct. This perspective questions the idea of authenticity and inner unity.

4.2. The Gradual Development of Postmodernism

Moreland (2005) offers an alternative approach to postmodernism, identifying four levels of its manifestation:

- Ontic postmodernism – Challenges the existence of an objective reality, promoting the idea that reality is merely a projection of individual perceptions (Moreland, 2005, p. 4).
- Alethic postmodernism – Denies the existence of a universal truth, replacing it with the belief that truth is relative and dependent on the individual asserting it. In this view, each person constructs their own truth without a supreme criterion for validation (Moreland, 2005, p. 5).
- Epistemic postmodernism – Does not focus on truth or reality but rather on how understanding is shaped by individual cognitive structures. As a result, objectivity is rejected, and knowledge is interpreted as a subjective and personal process (Moreland, 2005, p. 10).
- Axiological postmodernism – Rejects the existence of absolute moral values, promoting ethical and cultural relativism. In this framework, good and evil are regarded as fluid concepts, dependent on social norms and individual preferences (Moreland, 2005, p. 14).

The development of postmodernism cannot be confined to a fixed starting point or a clearly defined conclusion, as it remains an ongoing process. From the cultural revolution of the 1960s to the present day, postmodernism has continued to shape all aspects of intellectual and social life. By rejecting traditional standards and promoting decentralized thinking, this movement has profoundly reshaped conceptions of truth, identity, and reality.

5. Characteristics of Postmodernism

5.1. Hermeneutics – The Relativization and Subjectivation of Truth

One of the defining traits of postmodernism is the relativization of truth. In this framework, truth is no longer perceived as a fixed, immutable reality but as a social construct—fluid and subjective. Noebel (2006, pp. 119-120) highlights that postmodernism has abandoned the traditional dichotomy between truth and falsehood, replacing it with a perspective centered on preferences and personal interpretations. Consequently, even religious claims are filtered through a subjective lens, making the concept of God flexible and dependent on individual choices.

In postmodernism, truth is no longer determined solely by reason or consciousness but is also shaped by emotions and intuition. This perspective represents a departure from the Enlightenment paradigm, which emphasized rationality and objectivity. Postmodernism rejects the idea of absolute truth, considering that any such assertion is influenced by the community that upholds it. Thus, the concept of "universal truth" is replaced by contextual truth, which depends on the culture, history, and power structures of the group articulating it. As a result, postmodernism's vision of relativizing truth could encourage the overcoming of religious barriers between ethnic groups and could lead to an expanded ecumenism (Brie, 2008, pp.105-106).

Another key theorist, Jacques Derrida, asserts that truth is not a preexisting entity but rather a linguistic construct. In his analysis of postmodern hermeneutics, Erickson concludes that, for Derrida, truth does not possess an autonomous metaphysical presence but is instead created through linguistic play and interpretation (Erickson, 2001, pp. 131-132). This view contrasts with classical essentialism, which holds that things have intrinsic value and objective meaning. Derrida argues that what we perceive as truth is the result of our intentions and the linguistic context in which discourse is embedded (Derrida, 1978, pp. 11). Michel Foucault approaches the issue of truth from a different angle, asserting that truth is not independent but is determined by power structures and institutional norms that define what constitutes valid knowledge. In his view, truth is a product of societal power relations, shaped by those with the authority to define reality. Foucault provides the example of how the American Civil War has been interpreted differently over time, depending on the political interests and context of those analyzing the events (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Thus, for postmodernists, truth is not a fixed reference point but rather a product of historical and cultural conditions.

Consequently, in postmodernism, absolute truth is replaced by a multitude of individual or collective perspectives, shaped by external and internal contexts. This vision has led to a radical redefinition of knowledge and how it is validated, establishing the foundations of a society where subjectivism and relativism dominate public discourse.

5.2. Politics and Economy in Postmodernism

To fully understand the impact of postmodernism on society, it is essential to first examine the type of society under consideration. The postmodern political and economic context is complex, defined by a series of major ideological shifts that have influenced governance, the perception of authority, social order, and fundamental economic principles.

5.2.1. Postmodernism and Political Ideology

Postmodern philosophers have been significantly influenced by Marxism, with some even actively involved in Marxist-oriented political parties. Lyotard analyzes postmodernity as a process of political reconfiguration, advocating that, after the failures of Marxism and liberalism, politics must be restructured in a way that promotes social justice and equity (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 11-13). Consequently, any political approach that excludes minorities or exhibits intolerance toward cultural or social differences must be eradicated. Lyotard asserts that there is no single correct way to approach social organization, since no unifying narrative exists that can be applied universally to human life and collective decision-making (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 65-66).

The paradox arises when postmodern politics creates the illusion of individual autonomy while simultaneously imposing rigid restrictions dictated by social consensus or influential societal groups. These restrictions remain flexible and fluctuating, depending on the paradigm shifts imposed by cultural and political elites.

Noebel argues that postmodernism does not seek to support any specific political system but rather focuses on critiquing all forms of power while advocating for the liberation of so-called oppressed classes (Noebel, 2015, pp. 371-379). A distinctive feature of postmodern political thought is that, when an oppressed class is not readily apparent, one is artificially constructed. For example, the LGBTQ+ community is frequently portrayed as marginalized to sustain the rhetoric of civil rights struggles. The same phenomenon can be observed in discussions about immigrants, ethnic minorities, or specific professional groups.

5.2.2. Implications of Postmodernism on the Economy

Postmodernism promotes an economic vision closely aligned with socialism, rejecting capitalist principles on the grounds that they generate economic inequalities (Jameson, 1991, p. 3). Noebel highlights that one of the problematic aspects of postmodern economics is the use of ambiguous language, designed to dilute traditional economic concepts and obscure the inefficiencies of socialist systems.

Additionally, Rawls supports a combination of state-controlled economy and free-market policies (Rawls 1971, pp. 52–53, 65–73). In his view, capitalism should be supplemented with public policies aimed at reducing social inequalities by providing access to education (Rotaru, 2021, pp. 87-92), healthcare, and economic opportunities for all citizens. This approach represents a form of social liberalism that seeks to maintain economic competition while mitigating the negative effects of the free market through government intervention.

However, most postmodern theorists do not provide clear solutions for organizing an efficient economy but instead limit themselves to critiquing existing structures while advocating for the experimentation of unproven economic alternatives (Jameson, 1991, pp. 18-22).

Thus, postmodern political and economic thought is characterized by ideological ambiguity, promoting a discourse centered on deconstructing authority and social hierarchies without proposing viable practical solutions. This uncertainty directly influences contemporary society, including the Church (Rotaru, 2017, pp. 57-76), calling into question the traditional role of religious institutions in the public sphere.

5.3. Communication: Word vs. Image

Postmodern society has profoundly transformed the structure of communication, affecting methods of interpretation and information transmission, including the dissemination of biblical truth. Gheorghe argues that mass media does not merely transmit reality but actively reconstructs it, shaping a new mode of existence and awareness of the world (Gheorghe, 2006, p. 1). In what Bădău defines as the era of attention, the image becomes more appealing than the word, and information dissemination tends to be dominated by visual stimuli (Bădău, 2011, pp. 32-33). Arthur Hunt highlights that this shift is not a recent phenomenon but rather an ongoing struggle, evident since the Renaissance, when visual culture began to overtake the primacy of the written word—an effect counterbalanced by the Protestant Reformation, which reinstated the importance of textual study and biblical literacy (Hunt, 2003, pp. 78-79). The pervasive presence of mass media in people's lives has gradually diminished the book's value as an educational tool. This illustrates how the image has become the primary medium of information transmission, reducing the cognitive effort required for analysis and reflection.

The reversal of the priority of the word over the image has profound implications for society. The increased vulnerability of individuals to visual manipulation, particularly through dynamic images, leads to a diminished capacity for critical thinking and analytical discernment. The image imposes a relative truth, leaving little room for deep reflection or debate.

6. Conclusions

The transition from modernity to postmodernity represents one of the most profound cultural, social, and philosophical transformations of recent centuries. Modernity, characterized by confidence in reason, progress, and objective truth, has been gradually replaced by postmodernity, which challenges these concepts by promoting relativism,

subjectivism, and discourse fragmentation. This transition was not abrupt but rather the result of major historical, economic, and technological shifts, exacerbated by the traumatic events of the twentieth century, such as the two world wars and the rise of totalitarian ideologies.

In the realm of knowledge, postmodernism has introduced a critical perspective on traditional epistemology, questioning the existence of a universal truth and advancing the idea that reality is socially constructed and subjectively interpreted. This shift has had significant implications for hermeneutics, where texts are no longer read as having a fixed meaning but rather as open structures subject to multiple interpretations.

From a socio-political perspective, postmodernity has reconfigured collective values, emphasizing pluralism and diversity. While modernity aspired to stable structures and well-defined hierarchies, postmodernity tends to reject metanarratives, advocating for a decentralized and fluid approach to identity and society. This shift is also reflected in the economic domain, where traditional models of production and consumption are being replaced by an information economy marked by digitalization and globalization (Rotaru, 2014, pp. 532-541).

Another major consequence of postmodernity is the transformation of communication. Whereas modernity was dominated by typographic culture and the primacy of the written word, postmodernity promotes image-based communication and instant information exchange via new media technologies. This shift has significantly altered how information is consumed and interpreted, with substantial implications for education, culture, and religion.

In conclusion, the transition from modernity to postmodernity has prompted a profound reevaluation of values, knowledge, and social structures. While this transformation has fostered innovation and diversity, it has also introduced challenges such as the crisis of authority, the relativization of values, and the fragmentation of identity. In this context, it is essential for contemporary society to find a balance between postmodern critique and the need for stability to construct a model of existence that integrates flexibility with responsibility and diversity with coherence.

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