

POSTMODERNISM: People, Computers, and the Internet.

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Start with our own confusions and try to represent those. The reader will delight in the process of your attempt to represent that which you begin to know.

Michael Joyce.

What is the postmodern? It appears essential, if I am to convey anything to you as readers, that I ensure before I go very much further, that we are both considering the same thing. The trouble with this idea is that it appears to inherently contradict a central tenet of postmodern literary theory, which is that meaning is not something which can be encoded and transmitted from one person to another encapsulated in the words of a text. Instead meaning is constantly in flux, texts are fundamentally indeterminate (they have no fixed meaning), there is only an arbitrary link between (almost) any word and that which it signifies, and interpretation is only possible if the reader shares the same cultural information, even then is by no means certain. With this in mind it seems pointless to attempt a definition of the postmodern, but what the hell, in attempting to explain the theoretical assumptions of postmodern literary theory I have already attempted some kind of explanation, so I suppose that a little more won't hurt!

Firstly it might be useful to look at the origin of the 'postmodern literary theory' I've been talking about. The nucleus of my own conception of postmodern sensibility, by which I mean literary sensibility, was formed by reading Roland Barthes' seminal 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author' (within Barthes' ideas it may not actually be possible to have such a thing as a seminal essay, but I'd be grateful if you'd let that slip by for now). Simply enough Barthes proposes that we no longer consider the person who writes a text in the way we have previously. Instead of a 'creator' who uses his or her individual genius to invent a unique product, the constructor of a text (Barthes uses the word 'scriptor') brings together many ideas and techniques in writing which already exist. In this way the scriptor is more of a collagist. To quote Barthes:

We know now [because the author, and his insidious influence, are dead] that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.

The postmodern then, seems, according to Barthes, to be characterized by eclecticism.

Now the postmodern isn't a concept confined solely to literature, I just started there because I am a literature student. The point of this essay, which I hope you can forgive me for coming to so late within it, is to consider more generally, postmodernity as a more ubiquitous quality of modern life, and its relationship to the Internet. An understanding of the postmodern can be based on Barthes ideas, but goes beyond them. Late twentieth-century living is nothing if not eclectic. We draw the 'text' of our lives as living quotations from the innumerable cultures which spawn and sustain us. Fragmentation ('a tissue of quotations') is the foundation of an enduring but simultaneously ephemeral cultural montage which characterizes western culture.

If we relate what we have so far gleaned from Barthes ideas to the Internet, then it seems we can say that the 'net is postmodern because the 'net is nothing if not essentially eclectic. A fundamental quality of postmodern literature is the concept of intertextuality. In consulting culture (the 'dictionary' of 'quotations') either as 'writers' or readers, we are being inherently intertextual: we do not invent, merely re-use material that exists in other texts. The 'net encourages this, and increasingly comes not only to reflect culture, but, it seems, to be a central locus of culture itself.

Apart from all that, the Internet is self-evidently incredibly diverse. Whether this diversity is indicative of the postmodern nature of our lives, or whether this diversity is helping to postmodernize our lives is an interesting consideration, and one which I will attempt to grapple with later.

But how have others envisaged the Internet/postmodern relationship? Charles Ess, in his essay 'Modernity and Postmodernism in "Hypertext Notes": A Call for Theoretical Consistency and Completeness', considers the relationship In this way:

The poststructuralist/postmodern alternatives to the allegedly totalizing/totalitarian reason of Enlightenment include "decentering," a process of undermining centers of authority and meaning allegedly privileged by the Enlightenment meta-narrative. Hypertext is celebrated as embodying this process of decentering, as the hypertextual medium dilutes, if not obliterates, the "authority" of the author, throwing the full weight of constructing meaning onto the "reader" who, now freed from the ostensibly unnecessary restrictions of print media - including the dreaded "linearity" of print - can maneuver through hypertexts in whatever sequence and fashion he or she chooses.

As we can see, Ess's analysis illustrates a more subtly postmodern quality of hypertext than mere diversity. Although, as in Barthes theories, the eminence of the author is denied, and meaning coheres in the act of reading.

Ess does, though, have reservations: he is not convinced that hypertext is solely postmodern, believing, with considerable justification, that the author of hypertext must incorporate some elements of structure, whether intentionally or not, in order to avoid producing what would effectively be textual chaos.

Despite his reservations Ess does see the 'net as postmodern, if not as postmodern as some might consider. Doug Brent, through the theories of Marshall McLuhan, links the postmodern to the invasion of our lives by insistent media, the principle of which, prior to the Internet, must have been television:

Postmodernism arose with the onset of an electronic culture which gives the audience, if McLuhan is to be believed, a much more personal, intense, involving relationship with media that can no longer be held at a safe distance. When postmodernism, literary theory, and transformative technology meet in the work of Jay David Bolter, George Landow, and Mark Poster, we find that electronic technologies are the most unstable, the most indeterminate, the most distanced from physical matter.

The Internet is, according to this quote, postmodern both in the way it brings the outside, fragmented world into our lives whether we want it or not, and is simultaneously the provider of an ephemeral, and therefore unstable, experience.

Richard Lanham, in his book *The Electronic Word*, proposes the possibility that:

Perhaps we shall find that the personal computer itself constitutes the ultimate postmodern work of art. It introduces and focuses all the rhetorical themes advanced by the arts from Futurism onward. Digital desubstantiation poses in the most acute way the issue of instrumental substance, ... The interactive audience that outrageous Futurist evenings forced upon Victorian conventions of passive silence finds its perfect fulfillment in the personal computer's radical enfranchisement of the perceiver.

Interestingly Lanham, while he believes the computer (and by inference the Internet) to be postmodern, also considers that the computer empowers its user by making available opportunities for expression, through various software packages, as well as fundamentally incorporating the user in the process of artistic 'creation', in much the same way that Barthes sees the text cohering (and therefore being produced) in its destination rather than in its production. He also sees questions of 'what it is, what it represents, and what we do with it' as being significant illustrations of our attitude toward art. Postmodern expression can make a postmodern artist of anyone with the right hardware and software. Simultaneously art becomes more postmodern through the inherent diversification of its source, the dictionary of culture is expanded which in turn feeds itself in an even greater expansion.

But enough of others theories, why don't I tell you of my own incise interpretation of the phenomena of postmodern culture and the inherent postmodern qualities of the Internet? What interests me is whether or not postmodern living is shaping our lives or whether, on the other hand, we are shaping postmodern living. In other words are we becoming postmodern as a correlative of the eclectic and fragmented society we have created, or are we creating a postmodern society because our natures are fundamentally fragmented? In my opinion it is the latter of these two choices. There seems to be no reason why the environment that humans have created should not reflect their inner selves.

I'm coming to the conclusion about the human subconscious . . . that, no matter how you look at it, machines really are our subconscious. I mean, people from outer space didn't come down to earth and make machines for us... we made them ourselves. So machines can only be products of our being, and as such, windows into our souls . . . by monitoring the machines we build, and the sorts of things we put into them, we have this amazingly direct litmus as to how we are evolving.

Douglas Coupland. *Microserfs*.

The computer, the Internet, modern life itself, is a reflection of the qualities of humanity, and not vice-versa. After all what is a human being but an organic machine? As you sit there looking at what Lanham believes may be the perfect embodiment of postmodern art - the computer, essentially a model of its operator only lacking consciousness - the computer sits there and looks back at you. And what does it see? Reflected in the twin monitors of your eyeballs, it sees a miniature version of itself, running whatever programme you are using at that moment.

She explained to me that a suitably programmed computer can read a novel in a few minutes and record the list of all the words contained in the text, in order of frequency. "That way I can have an already completed reading at hand," Lotaria says, "with an incalculable saving of time. What is the reading of a text, in fact, except the recording of certain thematic recurrences, certain insistences of forms and meanings?..."

Italo Calvino. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

But, I hear you say, computers can't think, computers can't see; and while that is, at the present moment, true, (at least I think it's true!) it is not for a lack of desire on our part that they cannot; we not only wish to make it so that they can think and see, but think and see better than that which they represent - their fragmented human creators.

What I am alluding to is, of course, artificial intelligence.

"Wintermute is the recognition code for an AI. I've got the Turing Registry numbers. Artificial Intelligence." . . . "I met Neuromancer. He talked about your mother. I think he's something like a giant ROM construct, for recording personality, only it's full RAM. The constructs think they're there, like it's real, but it just goes on forever."

William Gibson. *Neuromancer*.

But I am also talking about what appears to be a desire to fragment ourselves, to express our own inherently chaotic, postmodern feelings, and to express them, whether intentionally or not, in the nature of the computer. People and machines continually move closer together.

Steffie turned slightly, then muttered something in her sleep. ... She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

Toyota Celica.

Don DeLillo. White Noise.

People equip their bodies with machines, both inside and out; from the highly complex, but now considered routine fitment of a heart pacemaker, to our long and passionate embrace of the motorcar, machines and humans appear to converge, to move inward from their respective positions on either side of the abyss that previously separated them.

She shook her head. He realized that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair... The fingers curled around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial. ... She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails.

William Gibson. Neuromancer.

The culmination of this convergence will be the machine that can think like a person: artificial intelligence. But, to phrase the dynamics of this process as I have just done is a commonly made mistake. Humans and machines do not converge in the strict sense of the word. It is humans alone who work in order to make themselves like machines, the machines are, as yet, indifferent to this process.

The abrupt jolt into other flesh. Matrix gone, a wave of sound and color.... For a few frightened seconds he fought helplessly to control her body. Then he willed himself into passivity. became the passenger behind her eyes. The glasses didn't seem to cut down the sunlight at all. He wondered if the built-in amps compensated automatically. Blue alphanumeric winked the time, low in her left peripheral field.

William Gibson. Neuromancer.

The Internet is like a model of human thought - indeed what else can it be? Instead of isolated units of human thought connected only through the interchange of language, whether through books, speech, or whatever, it is instead like a network of minds connected by telepathy. And this model of the desire for connection, this eclectic, consumerised,

I muse all the while about Tyler and his clique - Global Teens, as he labels them, ... They embrace and believe the pseudo-globalism and ersatz racial harmony of ad campaigns engineered by the makers of soft drinks and computer inventoried sweaters. ... But in some dark and undefinable way, these kids are also Dow, Union Carbide, General Dynamics, and the military.

Douglas Coupland. *Generation X*.

postmodern chaos, is representative of our desire to be the machines that we have created in our image. All we lack is the final piece of technology that will complete our impersonation of ourselves.

That we are fascinated with our postmodern, cyborg (part human, part machine) near future is evident from the representation of the concept by both theoretical and fictional writings on the subject.

The Man was still inside, giggling and adjusting himself, putting serious clothing on over his various devices and medical emergency equipment. since the last operation, which he couldn't quite remember, there was so much more to deal with. So many parts of the body had been replaced by machine. He looked down at himself - was it really him? Or just his? Shiny buttons, tiny cords. Oh my oh my.

Johanna Drucker. *Dark Decade*.

The concept of the cyborg is inherently postmodern: the cyborg is by its nature drawn from a number of sources, and the possible motivation for its construction is similarly various: art, science, medicine, sport, leisure, almost anything. Just as we create and draw toward ourselves ever more complex machines, machines which represent the hardware of human existence, so we express through these machines a collective consciousness - the software of human existence - a consciousness increasingly fragmented and eclectic - and we call that fundamentally postmodern embodiment, expressed on that representation of the postmodern body - The Internet!

"We've reached a critical mass point where the amount of memory we have externalized in books and databases (to name but a few sources) now exceeds the amount of memory contained within our collective biological bodies. In other words, there's more

memory 'out there' than exists inside 'all of us.' We've peripheralized our essence."

"Memory has replaced history - and this is not bad news. On the contrary, it's excellent news because it means we're no longer doomed to repeat our mistakes; we can edit ourselves as we go along, like an on screen document." "History has been revealed as a fluid intellectual construct, susceptible to revisionism, in which a set of individuals with access to a large database dominates another set with less access. The age old notion of 'knowledge is power' is overturned when all memory is copy-and-paste-able ..." I changed the subject to that of tickets for the upcoming Sharks game in San Jose.

Douglas Coupland. *Microserfs*.

This leaves me with one final comment: as I sit here and face the computer, I face a representation, an embodiment, fragmentary, eclectic, ephemeral (and don't forget that you also, as you read, face the same thing), an apotheosized simulacra of myself. And if I were it, staring blankly back at myself, inside, somewhere deep within my CPU, I'd probably be laughing; or, at least, if I'm not quite laughing yet, I probably soon will be!!

Someone turned on the TV set at the end of the hall, and a woman's voice said: "If it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay."

Don DeLillo. *White Noise*

But I do not believe totality can be contained in language; my problem is what remains outside, the unwritten, the unwritable. The only way left me is that of writing all books, writing the books of all possible authors.

Italo Calvino. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

At that very moment I understood that my capacities for understanding are so puny that reality (for me) is Chance. Due to this ignorance, my will is useless. For me, strangeness was and is everywhere.

Kathy Acker. *Empire of the Senseless*.

"An important warning... The perfect book for a generation that doesn't read much."

Chicago Tribune.

"...Leonard Bernstein; Lenny Bruce and Lester Banks, birthday party, cheesecake, jelly bean, boom..."

REM. 'It's the End of the World as we know it (and I don't mind).'

A little later I watched Steffie in front of the TV set. She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken.

Don DeLillo. *White Noise*.

Our two printers are called "Siegfried" and "Roy," because they're all shiny and plastic.

Douglas Coupland. *Microserfs*.

"new skis, new skis, new skis, new skis . . . "

Douglas Coupland. *Generation X*.

He studied her profile, she put some yoghurt in her cart.

Don DeLillo. *White Noise*.

"... '80s technology really penetrated our lives." He listed them off

VCRs, , tape rentals, , PCs, modems, answering machines, touch tone dialing, cellular phones, cordless phones, call screening, phone cards, ATMs, fax machines, Federal Express, bar coding, cable TV, satellite TV, CDs, calculators of almost other-worldly power that are so cheap that they practically come free with a tank of gas."

Douglas Coupland. *Microserfs*.

"I didn't say it. The computer did. ..."

Don DeLillo. *White Noise*.