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Beyond modernism and postmodernism: A new philosophy for a new world

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Abstract

Having defined Modernism and postmodernism, I then describe in what sense both paradigms have failed. The article discusses the possibility of a new approach that circumvents such drawbacks and a kind of “third position” that build on the innovations that modernism initiated while suggesting an alternative mode of discourse that overcomes its potential extreme rationalism or extreme relativism.

Keywords: Modernism; Postmodernism; paradigm shift; aesthetics

1. Introduction

As a prognosis for an age that began with the Enlightenment and culminated in the arts, sciences and the political of late 19th Century and extending to perhaps around the 1950's, modernism took root. It can be described as a failure. The incumbent – postmodernism – in its attempt to undermine the tenants and principles of modernism, with its deconstructive tendencies and relativism, can also be described as a dismal failure. In this article, I will begin by defining these said Zeitgeists' and then describe their unsuccessful attempt to create a better world. I will then argue that a new epoch awaits, drawing on the positive aspects of these paradigms while overcoming their drawbacks. Such a vision, I will describe as trans historical, circumventing the narrow confines of both modernism and post postmodernism. This will in particular describe “a new philosophy”, which will have value not only functionally, but qualitatively as well.

2. Modernism

Modernism can be defined as the attempt to make exclusive all specific domains of practice. In the arts, art was to be concerned about art itself, as this took shape theoretically as formalism. At the same time, the arts were no longer surrogates of religion or politics, but became disciplines in the own right pursuing secular, individualism and originality as key goals. At the same time, there is an attempt in modernist art to draw out underlining and true abstract principles through form, through an aggressive attack on tradition. Yet the irony is, in many forms this search for an essential truth often resulted in reducing man to clinical formulation and generalizes some kind of abstract universal man. One sees this, for example in the international style; in the proclamations of early modernist movements and in art for nationalistic, socialist, and fascist ideals – which in many cases while not purely modernist, occurs prominently during such times.

In science, we see the Structural processes of grand theorizing. Theories of natural selection; the rapid progress especially in mathematics, physics, and chemistry; Socialist versus Capitalist ideals; nationalistic sentiment and the immense growth in technological power, while others remained ignorant of such “salvations” – all conspired to produce a society full of competition, war, and the pursuit of power.

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While abstract art attempted to create a new world, one beyond politics and in Newman's words – “the outmoded props of history” – it was often simply interpreted formally and lost metaphysical platitude. In philosophy, a turn to either positivism or existentialism, either reduced all statements to logical properties said to inhere in the world or to a lack of any essential nature, truth, and proper mode of conduct other than what man happens to arbitrarily decide.

The “brave new world” promised by science and new artistic creation did not occur: war; colonialism; “the final solution” were all barbarous realities and define such a historical epoch. Science finally ushered in the possibility of atomic war and art lost connection to its public and to its function. Grand theories such as evolution led to the possibility of eugenics; Einstein's energy-mass equivalence led to the possibility of greater destructive power if in the wrong hands; Marx's dialectical materialism never led to a utopia.

While the modern as opposed to the premodern may simply be defined as the power of reason to gain knowledge and control of natural forces, reason seemed to bring the irrational into sharp focus quite paradoxically. In this regard, one may see art as inherently romantic and pagan, rather than bequeathing the light of reason; one may observe that the extreme focus on that which is said to be reasonable as itself creating its other, the irrational. Even where art appears classical, geometric, quite scientific, one would do well to note that this often created a sterile presence where emotion is expunged and meaning simply the relations of forms and colors with no underlying purpose or humanitas.

Moreover, the apparent reason that modernism was said to embody may hide a veneer of cultural dominance, individual bias and conditioning and exclusion of others that did not measure up to the apparent progress and civilization that this new world was said to encapsulate. It became the hegemony of the Western, Christian, white male and privileged a certain discourse, rather than the light of knowledge perse.

The stage was set for a new philosophy, one that did not make pretensions of a “grand narrative”, one that did not render each domain or discipline exclusive, one that championed relativism and deconstructed pretenses of truth and cast a skeptical eye on even philosophy itself, while art became concerned with the medium not insofar as it corresponded to an exploration of metaphysical depth and purity, but rather that it is not a transparent window on truth and thence also mixed and matched, redefining fine art, embracing the interdisciplinary and the surface over depth, post structural rather than structural. Such shifts came to be known as postmodernism.

3. Postmodernism

When pop art ridiculed the high seriousness of abstract expressionism, the stage was set for a movement away from deep meaning and philosophy to that of the trivial, surface quality of things. And pop art won the day just as consumerism is much more influential today in everyday life than philosophy is – or art for that matter. Post modernism is often defined as incredulity to a grand narrative, a sense that there is no ultimate answer or culture or set of ideals. In this sense, multiplicity; copy; the exterior is prioritized over individuality; originality and inner depth. Binary hierarchies are turned upside down: the structural becomes post structural. In practice, this has led to the deconstruction of seminal traditional texts whether in philosophy, art, and other disciplines where the position of the author is not objective and clinical but enmeshed in other influences such that no particular truth can be regarded as sacred. In its extreme form there is no truth nor underlying value. The results have often been a concern for “the other” and the truth of local narratives.

While addressing past imbalances wrought by historical realities of subversion and destruction and contesting objectivity itself, there are still major problems with such a credo. Firstly, in the denial of truth or reason – the logos – there is the possibility of a return to a kind of premodern paganism, a romantic spirit that is somewhat dangerous. The light of science and reason and its progress in medicine and other fields is surely a benchmark and denying as such is shortsighted.

Secondly, the very claim against there being a grand narrative is itself a grand narrative. While the extreme post-modernist may simply embrace this logical inference and laugh at the “truth” of it, this is rather more sinister. In fact, it is a certain anti-intellectualism and the possibility that sense can be found is negated; all texts merely the subtext of some other reality ad infinitum with known truth or fact as it were. Again, this is dangerous for it may result in the very denial of historical fact, of the possibility of justice in the face of evidence and of the acceptance of an “anything goes” attitude without recourse to moral imperatives. Post modernism then might be equated with the denial of any truth; as extreme leftist; as self-defeating; and in the most extreme form as not in touch with reality.

Yet there are some positive aspects to the rise of post structural, post-modernist thinking. It is true that science and quantifiable categorizations are itself embroiled in discourse, in a cultural hegemony of sorts. It is true that the white,

Christian male has been privileged. It is true that modernism in the name of reason and truth has led to the subjugation of others through powerful technologies. It is true that hierarchies and binary thinking is problematic and leads to the denial of the shadow, rather than its integration, and following Freud such may lead to neurosis, irrational fears, paranoia, and delusion, even collectively speaking.

In art, this alternative paradigm manifested in a number of ways: eclecticism; the “quoting” of previous styles meshed together; the rise of new media and modes of expression such as installation art, performance art and new media, as well as a critique of the cult of the artist-genius and the very elitist Institution of art itself. This has gained as much as it has lost. The gain has been in terms of a more playful, less sacred function of the arts (which began with modernism). The loss is in terms of a lack of coherence and direction, as if art has lost its punch as it were.

There also ironically appears to be in academia an even sharper divide between the exact sciences and the humanities – the former said to be involved in the recovering and discovering of facts while the latter in a frenzied denial of fact. And the two do not seem to share a common language. In this regard, post modernism becomes a concern largely of the humanities, while science appears to pursue different goals. The result is a schism in thought, a certain specialization, and a lack of a common enterprise. Philosophy is no longer the go-between, while the days of metaphysics appear to be numbered just as painting was said to be dead after Pollock.

4. Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism

Retaining the best of the modern, namely the Enlightenment project of reason as the measure, and the best of post modernism, namely an assessment of privileged discourse and hierarchies, one is left with the following observations:

- Reason may be the guide, but a moral compass is necessary so that reason itself is applied in order to accord with fair practice
- Alternative historical accounts may be embraced, but a fact still remains
- The inter and multidisciplinary is promoted with a view to finding new ways of modelling reality that is neither reductive, nor specialized
- Aesthetics assumes central place: the surface is equally important as the depth
- Rather than being solution driven, complexity, diversity and multiplicity is also a desired end goal.

I believe such an agenda will promote balance and integration. It allows for communication across discipline boundaries and fosters a knowledge base that is neither restricted to the quantitative nor the qualitative. It also engenders an ongoing critical attitude, rather than simply following through with the discourse and pattern of a given content area which itself may lead to a certain aesthetic, that is, a closed form of thinking – a fashion if you will.

While education has often been seen in terms of utilitarian ends – one studies in order to get a job or to learn a skill and so on – we should strive for a society that relishes a critical attitude, not simply a pragmatic one. How would such a philosophy change society? In the digital age, one marked by materialism and the credo – knowledge is power or notions of cultural capital – could we not “engineer” the next generation to be less competitive, while still promoting values such as the pursuit of truth and progress?

In this regard, I see science as precisely the pursuit for the truth that lies beyond the veil of nature, but art too is a kind of research. We should inspire eager minds to explore such domains as the very expression of an inner self, not simply for the pursuit of honor or prestige. This requires a change in values. With the waning of traditional religious belief among the more intellectual, there is still a dire need to retain a moral compass. As for society as a whole, there is a need to bridge the gap between the iconoclasm of academia with the rest of society. Armed with a sense of urgency, the modernist impulse of the light of reason and the post-modern recognition of our inherent bias and subjectivity, the time is ripe for a society that is more inclusive, more diverse, and more open to new ideas, if only power and greed were not driving forces. Eradicating these ills, is surely the real goal of education and of a truly theoretical account of what it means to be human in the deepest sense that does not simply see the human as a sophisticated animal, as socially conditioned and as lacking transcendent gifts. Of course, claiming such is not the full story ought to be made with caution as a balance between ego and the inner world is optimal.

5. Conclusion

Having defined modernism and the modern as well as postmodernism and argued for their failure in many respects, I then further argued that one could take the best of both polemical positions in order to engender an education system

and thence society as a whole that is both sensitive to facts and values. That is, two and two make four is certainly not fascist or simply the whim of an individual or a group, but a statement of truth that is effective in understanding and creating our reality when part of the corpus of mathematical knowledge. Yet, how this may be applied, in accord with which political dispensation and frame of reference, is another matter. In this way, I envisage an education system that teaches and respects facts and that indeed there is a reality, a truth, while at the same time motivates value-laden learning and meaning.

Rather than the binary modern-postmodern, could there not be a third position through which one does not descend into either extreme. Such a “space” would inspire creative thinking, emotive sensitivity, and intellectual rigor. We need not have a name for this position, say post-post modernism or such, but rather simply straddle boundaries, and in so doing blend the classical and romantic spirit. A society in touch with both reason and emotions, rather than subjugate one over the other to the detriment of the whole.

In fact, I would go so far as to claim that such a vision would be the panacea against not only diseases of the body, but those of the mind and collective social orders. It begins with the recognition that science has its merits and limits and that there is a need too for art and culture, not as an arm of politics, but rather as a kind of research. There is even the possibility of finding that which joins these seemingly separated fields of inquiry and method. The possibility for forging such a space would be the test of this generation and beyond. Failure to do so would lead to an insane one-sidedness and the possibility of a loss of moral refinement leading to calamity as history so attests. We enter the trans historical when the patterns and behaviors of the past are not replicated and a “new man” so takes the stage.

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