

Postmodernism

Sometimes the word “postmodernism” is used just to signify our own time, in which everything is in a flux, when politicians is overruled by impenetrable power structures, religious and cultural pluralism is in every little village and 100s of TV- and radio channels gives you as many life styles as they give you different kinds of soap. In such a time many people feel an urgent necessity to hold on to their given identity. If so, that would be very tragic, since the only secure way to handle this pluralistic flux is to roll with the waves, not standing as a pole in the middle of the stream where you slowly get eroded away by

the changes.

Yes, sometimes the word »postmodern« seems to mean nothing more than the world of today, with high speed economics, internet, globalism, end of the cold war etc. That’s a superficial view. The issue is much deeper.

For me the postmodern paradigm is primarily about transcending the cartesian dualism, realizing that the subject doesn’t exist outside of context.

Modernity is not modernism

Let’s start with modernity – what’s that? First we have to get rid of a common misunderstanding. Modernity, the modern paradigm, is not, repeat not, the same thing as modernism, which is an movement in the arts that started around 1920. Modernity is much older, it’s the result of the 18th century Enlightenment. You may as well say that modernity began with Descartes/ Cartesius *cogito ergo sum*. Since then everything has been wrong.

Of course modernity has given us a lot of wonderful things, penicillin, computers, atom bombs, automobiles and aeroplanes; especially it has given

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us a certain feeling for the individual. Individualism may well be the greatest gift that the West has given to the world, although I would say that it's something that started already in the medieval 13th century, together with romantic love. But the supremacy of the individual's point of view, the individualistic perspective, really skyrocketed at the 18th century. The french revolution is just one example of the results.

The split between body and soul that Descartes created didn't confine itself to the mind, it's a gap that runs through all of existence.

Cartesian dualism

The fundamental Enlightenment paradigm is known as the *representation paradigm*. This is the idea that you have the self or the subject, on the one hand, and the empirical or sensory world as the object, on the other, and all valid knowledge consists in making *maps* of the empirical world, the single and simple »pregiven« world. And if the map is accurate, if it correctly represents, or corresponds with, the empirical world, then that is »truth«.

One of the consequences of modernity is that this objectifying way of looking at the world spreads to everything – since it has given us all these marvels of science, it must be right, right? Like the ways women is regarded in our culture – as something to look at. The

outrage of the women is not primarily that men regard them as sexual objects (which I, being a man, think they should find flattering) but that they regard them as things. Things that consequently can be treated as things, sold and bought as things.

That's just one of the effects of cartesian dualism. Spectator arts is also a child of the cartesian, modern paradigm where the subject is split off from, different from the object. On the one hand you have a piece of art, a painting, a book, a film, whatever – on the other you have the spectator. The spectator is never involved, she is just tickled. That's why it's so difficult to produce anything more than shortlived emotional kicks with that kind of artistic expression, that's why the artists of our time is forced to use more force, more violence, more sex, bigger loudspeakers to arouse the audience.

What other problems have the objectifying cartesian dualism given us? It's easy to say that everything we see today is a result of this kind of thinking, this paradigm, but we need to be more specific. Exactly how is the problems of the world related to the modern paradigm?

The simplest way to state what's wrong with the mapping representation of »truth« is that it leaves out the mapmaker. When you think of the world as something outside yourself, some thing to act upon, you make it

difficult to have e.g. an egological view, since you don't regard yourself as part of the same system. You never have to count with what the economists call »externalities« – that is, hidden costs which are not immediately visible. Case in point: codfish. When you catch less and less codfish, the solution is of course to make bigger boats with more efficient fishing methods that make the codfish disappear quicker so you make bigger boats with more efficient methods...

But the mapmaker, that is the subject, the self, didn't just fall from heaven. It has its own characteristics, its own structures, its own development, its own *history* – and all of those influence and govern what we will see, and what we *can* see, in the supposedly »single« world just lying around. The self is up to its neck in contexts and backgrounds that determine just what it can see in the first place!

My world is not your world

Based upon what the *subject itself brings to the picture* it will picture the world quite differently, more or less regardless of what is actually »out there« in some pre-given world.

For each subject the world looks different because the world *is* different and this is the great postmodern revolution. The »pictures« that one makes of the »world« depend in large measure not so much on »the world« as on the subject's personal »history«.

What are the consequences of this postmodern view? One effect of the postmodern attack on everything that is stable, is of course the fundamentalistic panic reaction. But to what question is fundamentalism the wrong answer? That question is: How can you find a world view, directions, morality when everything is in a flux? How to raise kids when what's right from one point of view is wrong from another? Are there any absolute truths?

One absolute truth is evidently that there are no absolute truths. This means that it is impossible to have a discussion about political, economical, social or religious issues without at first defining the terms that are to be used. Is »reclaim the streets« about a civil right to an environment free from pollutions and advertising, or is it about teenagers with no meaningful occupation, or is it about the limits of proprietary rights or is it about freedom of speech? **In the postmodern world every issue will turn into a question of who is master of the agenda, who get's to define the problem – that is: who got the power?**

E.g. we're not discussing if Bush is right or wrong. We're discussing how to define terrorism: is it underdogs fighting against a militaristic superpower or fundamentalistic fanatics who wants to go medieval (like larpers, huh?)? *Then* we can tell

if his tactics are right or wrong. And so on and so on for every single question.

Even the personal identity, my experience of being myself, isn't stable anymore. The sociologists and psychologists have of course known for a long time that my identity is dependent on the reactions I get from others, but that was just academic hogwash. We never noticed that, since we all lived in the same world. Now I get to experience that every time I pass from one part of the town to another: suddenly I'm not at home anymore. Suddenly I'm the minority!

It's evidently not easy to live in the postmodern world, but that comes with the territory. This is the future, and in the future there will only be tentative solutions, as soon as a problem is defined in a new way, we get a new tentative solution. In this meaning the ideologies are dead – there are only separate solutions to separate problems.

So we have defined the postmodern paradigm as the insight that everything is contextual, everything depends on everything, and wherever you look the only thing you see is your opinion of what is there to see. Das Ding an Sich is more elusive than ever, because now we know that it remains forever hidden behind the searching for it.

The world is not there to find anymore – it's for you to define it. The one thing

that is stable is the search for power to decide the agenda – which means that the fundamentalists have got something right: now more than ever is power the defining tool.

Now then, is larping just another form of escape from the frightening pluralistic world, like the fundamentalistic longing for a simple world with a God-parent who says what is right and what is wrong? Or is larping the only effective way to learn to live in this brave new postmodern world? You have to decide for yourself – that's a postmodern choice you cannot avoid.

Save the world?

Suppose you want to save the world – that's what all our stories are about, aren't they, kill the dragon, save the kingdom, get the prince/princess – what are you to do? Since it is all about defining the world, setting the agenda, larpers have an definite advantage, because they are already used to define their worlds – and this is not just a joke, this is an important point.

To save the world you first have to decide which of all the things that are wrong you want to tackle, rainforests, Festung Europa, fundamentalism, right wing politics, species extuingishing and so on. That's easy, you just pick the issue where you feel your knowledge and talent can do the most. The second point is to realize

that the solution is on another level than the problem – you can't solve problems made by cartesian dualism inside that paradigm, you have to get out of it. How?

Watch me walking – it is impossible to talk about my movements without reference to the floor, the room, the environment. The same goes for everything. This is postmodern nonduality – subject and object is inseparable as dark and light, you can't have one without the other. This is an experience that you get very vividly by larping, where you get to feel in the flesh that reality is nothing more than what we collectively have agreed upon.

Thus the way to get out of the cartesian paradigm is to be a larper, or rather to engage in participatory arts. This is because participatory arts is the ultimate postmodern form of expression, since it in itself is carrying the nondualistic, anticartesian perspective.

As larpers we know how to live with many differing viewpoints at the same time; as larpers we know that we have the power to define what world we live in;

as larpers we know that »reality« is something that depends on context, you might as well say that reality is context. As larpers we know what it means to live in a world where everybody counts, where power to the people is acted out, not just talked about.

In spectator arts you are placed in a situation where you just can react but cannot act. You're once again back to childhood, subject to the wellmeaning intention of others. Spectator art is infantilising! Participatory arts is for grown ups!

Participatory arts reclaims creativity for Everybody. The socially isolated artist, the creative genius was a product of modernistic individualism. The creative collective and the collective creating of the larpers is an expression of postmodernity. The modern individualism was always something for an elect group, the elite. Participatory arts returns to an much older and more profound truth: You are the creator of your own world.

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