

POSTMODERNIST INCLINATIONS AND THE MEDIA: UNLEASHING THE INCUBUS?

Charles Nwachukwu. Ph. D.

Department of Mass Communication, Caleb University, Lagos

Abstract

Since postmodernism made its hideous entry into the body of knowledge, attempts have been made repeatedly to fully understand its ramifications and true values. Its amorphousness has constantly been a huge challenge. More worrisome is its gradual invasion of media content and technique. Here is one effort in the continuing task of gaining a better understanding of the tenets and benefits of postmodernism. This is with the hope of perhaps, appreciating its principles and applications just a little better. Some of the principal theories and philosophies usually associated with postmodernism, such as Deconstruction, Existentialism, and Post-structuralism have been examined and discussed in this study.

The cardinal stance of postmodernism in scholarship and life, as well as what it appears to portend, have been dealt with. Additionally, the rather strong manifestation and associations of postmodernism in the media, constitute another critical aspect of this article. The fact that the 'postmodern' has found its way into Radio, Television, Film, Print and Emerging Media calls for heightened caution. This becomes especially so, considering the awesome power and influence of the media, locally and globally. Viewed against the backdrop of a world full of adventurous youths, who embrace everything thrown at them, the status calls for much concern.

With a qualitative methodology, a descriptive approach, and an observational technique, this investigation has been greatly enhanced. This has enabled the discussion of relevant theories and concepts, whilst relating same to perceived developments in both the traditional and emerging media. The paper has attempted a modest contribution to on-going contemporary discussions on postmodernism, as well as its disturbing presence and influence in the media. This work also sends an alert to scholarship and humanity on the seemingly underestimated danger inherent in the postmodernist thought; and its malignant infiltration of the media space.

1.0 Introduction:

The maxim "Might is Right" does indeed suit and describe the pre-modern age. During this period, meaning, power and ethics were as defined and as ruled by authority. Whatever the king, monarch, sovereign, or government wanted was right; what it detested was wrong. Tradition reigned supreme.

Then came Modernism, which set out to systematically destroy tradition and the pre-eminence of authority. Instead, meaning and truth became defined and upheld by reason as well as science and objectivity. Logic, proof and linear thinking became the driving forces when man was said to have attained modernization. Modernism, therefore, became entrenched.

In recent times, Postmodernism has also crept into the scheme of things. The postmodernists reject definitions and classifications associated with reason and science. They present and prefer a collage, assemblage and merging of the good, the bad and the ugly. Postmodernism, therefore, insists that both truth and meaning, spring from the collective, anonymous, diversified confusion of reality.

This paper continues the discourse on postmodernism, and goes further to identify and discuss its presence, in the media.

In this paper, we shall endeavour to study postmodernism as a movement, a philosophy and an institution. More importantly, an attempt shall be made to identify and discuss where and how postmodernism has found its way into the media, as well as the perceived dangers. There will, in addition, be some final closing arguments.

2.0 Another Attempt to Understand Postmodernism:

Any successful attempt at defining postmodernism would, to the same extent, have succeeded in demystifying it. The said attempt would also weaken the central pillar of postmodernism which preaches that knowledge or the truth cannot emerge from a singular source. For this reason, it has remained difficult to define postmodernism in any straight and convenient manner.

Postmodern philosophy and lifestyle is not new. As a matter of fact, 17th century Europe witnessed the desire for something new and different. A group of self-styled “modern thinkers” arose, and began to question almost everything. Some became philosophers who tried to offer explanations on why the world is the way it is. Others became environmentalists, vegetarians and ‘humanists’. Many more questioned the existence of God, the divinity of Christ and demanded justification for the existence of the church, as well as the roles it played in the society. In a rebellious move, some became atheists, while a few turned to alternative faiths from the East. These pioneers of the postmodern thought declared the Age of Enlightenment, and tried to convince all to join their ranks.

Today, postmodernism is not just a philosophy and a way of life, it has become a movement. It does appear as if the adherents of postmodernism are a group of very worried individuals. Their concern over almost everything appears to build up by the day. For example, postmodernists are incessantly worried about nationalism, religion, war, politics, industrialization, commerce and so on. Their concerns seem to spring from a loss of faith in the West and its civilization. They believe these have done more harm than good on the planet and on humanity.

This group questions the concept of “truth”, saying there is no such thing as the absolute truth. Truth, they continue, is what the individual makes of it, therefore everyone should be allowed to determine his or her own truth. Postmodernists see the world as dysfunctional. The way it appears to them, there is something terribly wrong with the world and the universe. Why, for example, is the world full of pain, death and inequity? Why are a few powerful and privileged individuals imposing their concept of truth, right or wrong on the generality of the earth’s inhabitants? The questions and concerns go on and on. In the end, having confused themselves more than enough, postmodernists preach liberty and a global community.

Despite the unclear picture and fuzzy focus which postmodernism presents, a few attempts have been made to define and describe it in tangible terms. One of such is by James Morley (2011), as cited by the Electronic Labyrinth. According to him, postmodernism was a movement that rejected modernism and the avant garde, in preference for something new. Morley’s attempt is not only skimpy, it is also extremely monolithic, as his definition is only seen from the point of view of architecture.

Frederic Jameson (1991), says postmodernism was the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism. He avers that postmodernism was born out of the exigencies of the immediate post World War II period. This period was characterized by globalization, consumer capitalism and multinational businesses. Although Jameson’s approach is as nebulous as postmodernism itself, he was, however, able to apply his understanding of the concept to economics, aesthetics, philosophy and politics. In a way, therefore, he has attempted a wider application over and above what James Morley tried to accomplish.

With the main stance of postmodernism discussed, another attempt can be made at distilling the essential pre-occupation of postmodernists. All this form the core ideals of the adherents of postmodernism:

- A continual skepticism towards the ideas and ideals of modernism and the avant garde, especially with regard to truth, progress, objectivity, severance, reason, certainty and identity.
- The belief that communication in whatever form or description remains metaphorical, political, mythical and biased.
- The assertion that meaning and experience can only be created by the individual, and nobody else can impute objectivity into this.
- Total rejection of originality, and the position that everything is a copy of an earlier thing.
- A globalized society (world) characterized by cultural pluralism and profound interconnectivity; without any dominant centre politically, economically, intellectually and communication-wise.

3.0 Some Associated Theories and Philosophies

Deconstruction is one theory that shares the alleged ideals of postmodernism. Deconstruction has its roots in Martin Heidegger's concept of "Destruktion". This concept is in close proximity with the views of Friedrich Nietzsche. Both show absolute despondency, as they preach destruction, demolition, erasure and the absence of reality.

Faced with the ultimate bleakness which Heidegger and Nietzsche favour, Jaques Derrida (1967), sought to temper down the original concept with his own, known as Deconstruction. Although Derrida refused to confront the subject frontally, an attempt can be made at gaining a basic understanding of his position. Essentially, it appears to suggest that everything consists of the good and the bad. Whereas, the good may make a thing proper, the bad may also make it improper. Therefore, within anything, can be found something that can be used to undo it, or render it less worthy.

In the area of literary criticism where Deconstruction has found its pivot, further explanations are available. In deconstruction, it is possible to use the elements in a text to betray the central features of the same material. This is to say that certain incidental or peripheral aspects of a text can betray its key position or message.

Deconstruction also aims at locating and dismantling the pillars of a literary piece through observed inconsistencies, no matter how infinitesimal. Deconstruction may also be seen as an attempt to frame and present questions raised by the answers which a text proffers. It could be interpreted to mean the systematic attempt to disintegrate and disfigure what we call understanding.

Finally, on deconstruction, let us consider John Caputo's explanation.

Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell a secure axiom or a pithy maxim, the very idea is to crack it open and disturb its tranquility. Indeed, that is a good rule of thumb in deconstruction. That is what deconstruction is all about, its very meaning and mission, if it has any. One might even say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction is. In a nutshell.... Have we not run up against a paradox and an aporia.... The paralysis and impossibility of an aporia is just what impels deconstruction, what rouses it out of bed in the morning....

John D. Caputo (1997:32)

Caputo is, undoubtedly, opposed to the very concept and notion of deconstruction. According to him, deconstruction cannot come up with a great idea, but specializes in rubbishing great ideas wherever it finds them. Herein lies its affinity and affiliation with postmodernism.

Another theory and philosophy which has found relevance in postmodernist thought is Existentialism. Whereas Socrates and Plato have advanced arguments in favor of a common good or common truth, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche have reacted sharply to this notion. They posit that good is relative and truth, personal. These latter school constitute the vanguard of existentialism.

Existentialism, like all other hanging philosophies and theories is not simple to define. Existentialism itself is diverse, complex and somewhat confusing. It may, however, be described as an aspect of philosophical thought which recognizes and affirms individuality, choice and freedom. Existentialism, it appears, rests on five fundamental themes or pillars. The first is that existence precedes essence. Essence, existentialists say, comes after existence. Therefore, existence is the primary thing; this assertion consequently pushes essence to a secondary position. One needs existence in order to have essence, they argue.

Anxiety and anguish is the second pillar of the existentialists. They see fear and dread as constant and common denominators of the human life. Man, they say, is always afraid that something might go wrong, and in the end it does. There is, therefore, the anguish about the nothingness and meaninglessness of life as we know it. Anguish, existentialists insist, becomes the all- pervasive and universal condition of human existence.

Absurdity is the third recurring theme of existentialist thought. Man suddenly finds himself on this planet. He can argue that he exists because his senses tell him so. He, however, cannot explain why or how he got here, nor can he say what he is here for. To make matters worse and more pathetic, he cannot remember having chosen to be here. When they consider all these, existentialists conclude, and very sadly too, that human life is nothing but an absurdity.

The theme of Nothingness is next. In existentialism, questions are asked about the structure that brought man into being. Where is it, what is it, and how does that structure work? Existentialists believe that just as man can look forward, he should also be able to look backwards. However, when he looks back, what does he see? Nothing! Man is the essence, they argue, but there is no existence. Since existence precedes essence, it means that all is nothingness.

Death is the fifth and final pillar is existentialism. The argument here is that that horrible thing called death is the end of every human. It is a reality that awaits everyone, and it compliments the notion of nothingness. So man is born without choosing to be born, he lives his absurd life in fear and anxiety. Some day, somewhere, somehow, death catches up with him. What happens after that, they ask? Nothingness!

The pathetic position assumed by one plaintive existentialist is worthy of our attention here.

What then is existentialism? There exists now a widely accepted definition of existentialism. It is that existentialism is the philosophic standpoint which gives priority to existence... Existentialism affirms the ultimate significance, the primacy of my existence as this flickering point of consciousness of myself and of objects of which I am aware, my existence as this conscious being against all efforts to define me, to reduce me to a Platonic essence, or to a Cartesian mental substance, or to Hegelian carrier of the spirit of my culture, or to a scientific neurological mechanism or to a social security number. Whereas classical and modern rationalism have regarded rational essences or self-evident ideas as having primacy over individual existence.

T.Z. Lavine, *From Sorates to Sarte: The Philosophic Quest*, p. 328

(Quoted in www.fortunecity.com).

Lavine is, indeed pathetic. It is so difficult for him to see that existence without essence is futile, yet he concedes and all too easily, to an ugly futility. Like all existentialists, he rejects science and rational thinking, which puts him in the same camp as postmodernists.

Post-structuralism is another postmodern theory. It is founded on “Overdetermination” – Overdetermination will imply that theory and reality are connected. What we learn is what we are taught, and what we are taught is what we proceed to see. Post-structuralists declare that at any point in time, what we have been taught, which is in itself what we have learnt, is limited to our sources, its elements and our environments. This is to say that our view of good and bad, truth and falsehood can only be limited to what we know. Post-structuralists also say that this knowledge is imperfect, as it may include some falsehoods. Therefore, truth is subject to investigation.

Overdetermination also postulates that existence itself is made up of mutually constitutive processes. By this is meant that all processes are continuously changing and transforming. This aspect of overdetermination borrows from one of the sayings of the Greek philosopher- Heraclitus. He it was, who said “one can never step in the same river twice”. Post-structuralists of note include Michael Foucault, Louis Althusser, Ferdinand de Saussure, Naom Chomsky and Barbara Epstein. Essentially, these adherents hold that it is necessary to go beyond the structuralism of theories which imply rigidity in thought and in reality. Post-structuralism is aligned with postmodernism owing to the fact they both question the “truth”, and reject the rigidity of tradition.

4.0 Postmodernism in the Media

A key position of post of postmodernists is that postmodernism is a necessity which has to emerge as a result of the failure of modernism. Adherents of the movement say that society consciously and sub-consciously accepts and operates in accordance with postmodern ideals. Andreas Saugstad (2006) agrees. He argues that in recent times, the internet, television, radio, newspapers, magazines and books have all been caught up in the postmodern web. It is pertinent to add film to the long list of windows where postmodern has strong presence, as well as influence. Citing examples from his country-Norway, he laments that one of the most intellectual newspapers- *Morgenbedet*, accepts and defends pluralism. He also informs that the same was true of certain major publications in France and the United State of America.

Also, writing in the “Wilson Quarterly”, Frank McConnel (1993), avers that as a means of communication, television must encompass creation, perception and processing. Through the television medium, he argues on, entertainment becomes the rational format for all experiences and subject matters. The audience is used to some kind of order, and they expect the broadcaster to be responsible enough to maintain this. Therefore, postmodernism, he contends, with its inherent relativism will make the broadcaster irresponsible and insensitive to the audience when he breaks this order.

Pat Aufderheide (1986) presents an excellent example of the infiltration of the media by postmodernism. His study of programmes on the European cable channel MTV (Music Television) will prove this standpoint. According to him, the programme style of the station is both irreverent and indecent. He is convinced that MTV manipulates its audience with its strange approach to programming, thereby, engendering an improvised community of spectators who embrace its simplistic dream-like world.

As a matter of fact, MTV is not alone in the craze for postmodern ideals. Most entertainment cable channels around the world are embracing the postmodern. Indecency and irreverence which characterize pluralism can be seen on Fashion Television (FTV), Entertainment Television (ETV), Channel O, and so on. Most of the so called Reality Television shows are nothing but the postmodern in action. In some of these reality shows, people are just bundled up together and then filmed in both thinkable and unthinkable situations.

A couple of years ago, the girl who represented Nigeria on the Big Brother Africa reality television show was drowned with alcohol by the boy who eventually won the contest. He not only got her drunk, but proceeded to fiddle with the most personal parts of her body, before our very eyes. What the Girls of the Playboy Mansion do beats the imagination of all who have not lost their core human essence. Not only do these girls play and pose in nudity to the pleasure of frenetic photographers, they even indulge in disturbing scenes with the eccentric and wizened playboy himself.

On all these cable television channels, including Trace, MTV Base, as well as Style, the cinematography and post-production procedures are chosen and designed to harass the viewer. Looming and flashing lights, sustained swoosh pans, dizzying zooming-in and zooming-out along with pulsating sound effects are deliberately employed to bombard the viewers senses; sometimes leaving them slightly intoxicated.

Television broadcasting which used to be planned, rehearsed, directed, shot and then edited, has lost order and direction, as everything now appears to be good enough for audience consumption. No thanks to postmodernism, the broadcaster is no longer responsible to the audience. More worrisome is the fact that most affluent establishments and corporate organizations prefer to sponsor such aberrations, at the expense of clean and well-thought-out educational and cultural programmes.

Radio has also been trapped by postmodernism. A good number of music and entertainment radio channels across the globe relish and revel in the ideals of pluralism. Suddenly, discipline and ethics are thrown overboard, as presenters and artists continually over reach themselves.

The powerful Mental Imagery which the radio medium offers is exploited to offer tease, sex and grime to the audience. At first they receive these with revulsion, but as time goes on, they begin to accept it.

Film also has its fair share of the postmodern. Generally speaking, film shares the same kinds of challenges with television, being an audio-video medium. Everyday, films from Hollywood, Bollywood, Kollywood, Nollywood and so on, are released into the global market. Some are feature films and documentaries with positive messages. A good fraction presents and glorifies postmodernism. The film MEMENTO is a classic example of cinematic post-structuralism, which is in itself an aspect of postmodernism.

The emerging or new media appear to be the most affected by postmodernism. The internet is a perfect example of the postmodern. It is a collage, assemblage, amalgamation and agglutination of the good, the bad and the ugly. On the internet, one finds websites that offer clean entertainment. Others enhance the furtherance of knowledge, skill and self-improvement. At the other extreme, one finds websites on pornography, terrorism, drugs, robbery, dark arts, insurrection and all manners of negative values. Furthermore, the fact that everyone can carry his or her own internet connectivity device along, makes the internet most vulnerable to postmodern influence and infestation. So, it is evident that the media has come under the grip of postmodernism. Alarming, this grip gets tighter and tighter as the days go by.

To the extent that content and technique on Radio, Television, Cable, Film, Print and Social Media dispense with order as well as discipline, opting to embrace indecency, irreverence and irresponsibility, to the same extent do these media celebrate and glorify postmodernism. In a situation where postmodernism offers no-right no-wrong, no-true no-false, no-good no-bad, everything becomes fit for audience consumption, even the most bizarre and unimaginable.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

Postmodernists and their associates are simply a group of disturbed, disgruntled and misguided individuals who have rejected reality. If they truly believe that reality does not exist, let them demonstrate this by first extinguishing themselves. They also denounce linear thinking, science and progress. Yet, it is evident that man and indeed the planet has moved from the Stone Age to the Modern Age, riding on these vehicles benefits.

A diffident attempt has been made to ascribe certain benefits to postmodernism by working through one of its subsidiaries – postcolonialism. The argument here is that postcolonialism has opened up a vista for the hitherto colonized to redefine themselves and their values in unique and specific terms. This has seen such minorities doing away with earlier homogenous definitions foisted upon them by erstwhile colonial masters. There is also the claim that postmodernism, through postcolonialism, has brought the issue of reckless use of power in totalitarian regimes of the world to the fore; and has succeeded in drawing global attention as well as concern to same. Even of the purported benefits were real, the damage done by postmodernism using the media makes these infinitesimal, if not non-existent.

Little wonder then that Chuck Colsen (2004) comments that “A generation on channel- surfing has lost the capacity for linear thinking and analytical reasoning.” Barry Lewis and Kazino Ishiguro (2009) would assert that postmodernism is characterized by temporal disorder and disregard of linear narrative. Al Gore (2006) dismisses postmodernism as an unfortunate combination of narcissism and nihilism.

All these point to the fact that the challenge posed by postmodernism should not be taken lightly. If everything is both good and bad and everyone has the freedom to choose, anarchy and mayhem would be unleashed on our world. Excellence and standards in scholarship would disappear, societal life and living would become meaningless. Postmodernism only promises to take humanity back to the Stone Age, and even further. As a matter of fact, postmodernism has unleashed the incubus on the world, through its media. It is the duty of all to reject it and resist it, so as to halt this retrogression which has already begun in the affairs of man and his planet.

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