

From Caveman to Frenchman

A Lecture On Postmodernism



This is the story of Narrative. Understanding narrative is as good a way as any of understanding many of the chief concepts of postmodernism. It's also a pretty good way to understand a lot of other things. Narrative is, of course, another word for story. And everyone loves a good story. They always have; they always will. We are going to explore why.

This is a story told in multiple parts; only the final part actually discusses contemporary critical theory, or more simply put, postmodernism. To understand postmodernism, you need first to understand modernism. And to understand modernism, you need to understand the past.

So, we begin with the past. Or more specifically, we begin with the dawn of narrative.

Part One

Narrative

Since this is the story of Narrative, we should start with a definition of Narrative. I'm using a very specific definition here (and I'm not alone in my interpretation of Narrative; there are plenty of Narrative theorists out there, so rest assured I'm not just making this up).

Narrative, simply put, is connecting the dots.

The dots are the disparate pieces of perceived reality.

So, Narrative is the connecting of the dots that are the disparate pieces of perceived reality.

Which may sound like a load of jargon, but it isn't.

I could simplify this, and say that Narrative is connecting the dots of reality, but that would assume the existence of reality. We don't want to do that, not when we're going to end up talking about postmodernism. Most philosophers, and for that matter most of your average schmegeggy on the street, will tell you that there is such a thing as objective reality. There is a rock over there, there is a tree over there, we are on the earth, we are breathing air, that person standing over there is my brother Kermit. But it doesn't hurt anybody to say *I perceive* a rock over there, *I perceive* a tree over there, *I perceive* that we are on the earth, *I perceive* that we are breathing air, *I perceive* that that person standing over there is my brother Kermit. If in fact there is such a thing as objective reality, then I am perceiving it as it is. No objective reality has been damaged by our adding the concept of perception.

So, Narrative connects the dots of perceived reality. There's all kinds of stuff out there, all kinds of dots, and Narrative connects them. Why? Narrative, at this level, is the attempt to find order in what is perhaps a random universe, to connect the dots of perceived objective reality into a subjective understanding. Narrative is attempt to understand the world around us.

Or at least that's one kind of narrative. There's others, but they are all connections of dots.

Narrative, simply put, is connecting the dots.

I personally maintain that the instinct to Narrative, the instinct to make stories out of things, is what makes us human. Stuff happen to all species. Cats and dogs live in a world of trees and rocks and air just as humans do, but only humans try to make sense of everything, and the way we make sense of everything is the thing called Narrative. Unlike cats and dogs, humans connect the dots.

And here's an important concept: I'm not *just* talking story here—that is, Narrative as story—although the end result may be a story. I'm talking the *process* of connecting the elements, the process that is also the creation of a Narration. The instinct to Narrative is both the instinct to make sense of things and the instinct to make sense of things in a certain way. The human mind understands stories. Understanding stories and creating stories are two examples of how the human mind works. That's all part of the Narrative Instinct.

Humans love to tell stories, and they love to hear stories.

The is actually a history of story, a story of story, if you will. And we will start at the beginning, at the **dawn of history**.

Let's set the stage: This is the period when early humans are living in sod huts and caves, wondering where their next woolly mammoth is coming from. They've got a couple of chiseled pieces of flint they use as tools, and with any luck, someone in the neighborhood has a way with fire (woolly mammoth sushi is ok, but woolly mammoth on the grill—umm-umm!).

This period is the Dawn of Narrative. This is the beginning of our attempt to make sense of the world in which we live. How does woolly mammoth guy do this? He connects the dots of his (perceived) reality. He creates a Narrative to explain his world. And by so doing, he invents Science and Religion in one fell swoop. (Science and Religion are one and the same thing as far as woolly mammoth guy is concerned.)

The first human Narratives are stories of Animism. Animism is the application of life to inanimate objects. (The same root word informs animation, where somebody makes squiggles on film come alive; that person is called an animator.)

an i mism, n.

1. the belief that things in nature, for example, trees, mountains, and the sky, have souls or consciousness
2. the belief that a supernatural force animates and organizes the universe
3. the belief that people have spirits that do or can exist separately from their bodies

(Thus spake the Encarta dictionary.)

The first two definitions are the ones we're interested in.

Animism imbues inanimate objects with "spirit," or as the definition would have it, with souls or consciousness. The rocks and trees are somehow alive. Additionally, the phenomena we observe can't just *happen*—the sun doesn't just rise in the morning by itself. The sun is not an inanimate object. The sun is not a ball of gas 93,000,000 miles away from earth. To woolly mammoth guy, the sun is a living thing, an animated thing. Woolly mammoth guy has no tools to measure the distance to the sun, or the chemicals that comprise the sun. The only tools this guy has are a few flint knives and his own eyes to see with. But he perceives a certain reality. He sees the sun in one position in the sky in the morning, and another position at dusk, and nowhere at all at night. His instinct to Narrative leads him to make up a story to explain it. He connects the dots of his perceived reality. As a result, he comes up with the story of the sun god.

Let's look at the Greeks, which is a few thousand years down the line from woolly mammoth guy, but a good indication of how the story developed over time. In Greek mythology the sun was a chariot on fire, pulled by two winged horses, driven by the god of the sun along the sky during the day.¹

The Greeks (and woolly mammoth guy) looked at phenomena they didn't understand, and turned it into something they *could* understand. They got it right as far as the sun bringing life-giving heat and light to earth. They created stories, which we now refer to as myths, to explain these phenomena. They connected the dots the best way they could.

Look at the stars. Woolly mammoth guy did. Cultural history is full of stories to explain the lights in the sky, stories that have nothing to do with faraway suns. Woolly mammoth guy,

¹ Though Apollo was seen as a god of the sun, bringing life-giving heat and light to Earth, he was never expected to carry out this charioting duty. This work was still by Helios, apparently another sun god (I'm no expert on myths) who kept his own identity totally independent from Apollo.

with his instinct to narrative, couldn't just look up and see dots: He had to connect them. Woolly mammoth guy connected the dots and made constellations out of them. This was a pretty common practice, apparently, among all cultures (imagining constellations, that is). There's nothing a human hates more than random unconnected dots.

There is an area of study on this, religion in cross-cultural perspective, that you can pursue further on your own if you're interested. Curiously enough, there are often great similarities in Narratives from one culture to another. There's not only a need to explain the same things, e.g., creation, but a similarity in the way they're explained. There's a common thread of Father/Child the pops up often. In some Native American creation stories, the Father sends Coyote down to earth, and Coyote somehow ends up siring the race of humans. Prometheus steals fire from Zeus and gives it to humans. In historical times Krishna and Christ are fairly contemporary, bearing comparable messages. It's no great surprise that humans feel compelled to concentrate on the same subjects, like Creation, the First Cause, but it is surprising how often disparate peoples come up with comparable Narratives. Why are they comparable? Another very arguable area of study altogether.

So, we feel compelled to create a story of things. Why? The making of stories is a part of human nature. But not only are people instinctively narrators, they like to hear stories. Hearing stories is the other side of the Narrative coin. Not only do we like to organize random data, we like random data when it's organized by others.

This instinctive drive to Narrative as discussed so far, the attempt to explain perceived reality, to connect the dots, to process the random information around us, gives us a number of things. Woolly mammoth guy's attempt to connect the dots provides us with the beginnings of both science and religion. They start out as one and the same, Animism, but soon become quite different, at least as far as Narrative is concerned. But there's another take on what narrative can be, and WMG practiced this too. Narrative can also be the pure recording of facts—"Let me tell you what happened." So the other big thing WMG invented was history.

"Let me tell you what happened." WMG is going to relate a sequence of events to you. He's going to tell you about the hunt today. How he and his brother Kermit subdued a woolly mammoth as big as his mother-in-law's cave. Killed it with one blow. Cut off all the meat in half an hour. Brought it home to great acclamation from the crowd back in the cave.

That is history.

That is the narration of a series of real events.

Except, of course, the narration is selective. The narrator picks and chooses what he wishes to include in the story. For instance, WMG leaves out the part where he and Kermit stopped for a couple of skinny lattes on the way to the hunt. That picking and choosing, that selectivity, is part of the process of narration. I don't tell you everything; I tell you what I think is important to tell you. I *can't* tell you everything, I've got to pick and choose.

ALL NARRATION INCLUDES SELECTIVE CHOICES.

In science, there are seemingly infinite phenomena. I have to pick the ones to study, I have to pick the way to study them, I have to pick among the parts of my observation to select the relevant and irrelevant (rightly or wrongly).

In history, there are seemingly infinite phenomena. “Let me tell you what happened yesterday.” There are 6,500,000,000 people on the earth. I can’t tell you what happened to each and every one of them yesterday. And why yesterday? Yesterday where? The historian is a great selector. There are schools of history that prescribe how the selection should be made (history as the story of great people or great events, history as the story of everyday life, history as determined by geography).

WMG was unquestionably a historian. Selectively, of course, but a historian nonetheless. As a matter of fact, WMG left behind some of his narratives for us to study: the hunt paintings on the walls of the caves in France (which just goes to show you how French this whole subject is). These are probably the oldest narratives in existence, texts independent of the narrators, still surviving to this day. When we look at these paintings, we should ask, why this, why not something else? Why did the narrators select this part of their lives to record?

Why? The selection indicates, if nothing else, its importance. They could have painted



anything; there could also be paintings of gathering apples or making pancakes. Were those activities not considered as important as the hunt? Should we interpret that the hunt was the most important activity of WMG’s life since it was the only one he permanently recorded? Or should we guess that the painters in the tribe were the same folks as the hunters, so they just happened to draw what they knew?

For that matter, are we sure that it is, indeed, history?

At some point in the history of Narrative, embellishment comes along.

“Let me selectively tell you what happened.” And in the telling, we not only pick and choose, we embellish a little. We make up a few details. We make the killing of the woolly mammoth a fight to the death, blood spurting out of every tusk. We make it a better story. The audience eats it up. And we embellish some more.

And at some point we just make things up whole cloth, and the creation of fiction takes place.

“Let me tell you what happened.” Except it didn’t happen. It’s a narrative connecting not the dots of perceived reality but the dots of imagined reality, or subjective fantasy. But it’s still a narrative, and it still connects dots.

We're almost ready to summarize now.

Narrative is the connecting of the dots that are the disparate pieces of perceived reality. Narrative is the processing of random information. Narrative is the selecting of which dots to connect. Narrative sometimes is the connecting of dots that don't even exist.

Narrative is a lot of things.

1. The collection of random narratives of how things happen = Science, religion, cosmology, First Causes

2. The collection of random narratives of what happened = History

3. The collection of random narratives of things that didn't happen, Narrative for Narrative's sake, to fulfill that innate desire for narration = Fiction

But we've left out perhaps the most important form of Narrative, at least as far as modern theory is concerned. There is one other major aspect of creating narrative, and that is the creation of the self—what we know, what we remember, what we choose to define ourselves with as individuals.

The individual—or better yet, the concept of the individual—is the narrative that we create for ourselves. Narrative is the connecting of the dots that are disparate pieces of perceived reality. Every individual human constantly performs this act of narration as a part of conscious existence. Our brains are filled with random data. How we connect these pieces of random data is how we define ourselves. What we remember and what we forget is the process of selection that is essential to Narrative. We select among phenomena to create our personal beliefs, we select among events of our lives (which are 24 by 7) to create our personal histories, we embellish, we even make things up whole cloth. We create ourselves.

Each of us, in other words, each individual, is a narrative. A narrative of our own choosing, as each individual is his or her own narrator.

Narrative is the connecting of the dots that are the disparate pieces of perceived reality.

Each individual comprises a connection of the dots that are the disparate pieces of his or her perceived reality.

The individual is a story of his or her own making.

Part Two

Classical Narratives

This is the story of Narrative. So far what we've done is attempted to define what narrative is in a general sense. The time has come to look at some actual narratives, some examples of what we're talking about.

As you read this, keep in mind that modernism and postmodernism are rooted in the narratives of the past. If you don't have at least a passing understanding of the past narratives, you will have little or no real idea what the mos and pomos are talking about. (For that matter, even if you have phenomenal understanding of the past, you may still have little or no idea what the mos and pomos are talking about, but that's their fault, not yours.) So bear with this stuff. It may seem pointlessly irrelevant to understanding contemporary thought, but it isn't. You'll see.

Since what I am writing here is, indeed, a Narrative, meeting all the parameters thereof which I've already explained, it is by its nature a *selective* connecting of dots. I have taken certain perceived objective items and attempted to arrange them in an orderly fashion. By doing this, I not only tell you a bunch of stuff about the items themselves, but, indirectly, a bunch of stuff about myself. Why did I pick these items and not other items? I point this out because, when we get to contemporary theory, the discussion of "why these choices" is as important, if not more important, than the story the choices tell themselves. Keep this in the back of your mind if you have any desire at all to be a pomo scholar.

Another thing you should keep in mind before we continue is that, while we will occasionally discuss philosophical concepts, we are not discussing philosophy exclusively, and we are not discussing it in much depth. This is because we are going to look at modernism and postmodernism as, primarily, art movements. Which is, arguably, what they are. And which is, arguably, the easiest approach to understanding them. The underlying body of Thought that informs these art movements could indeed directly be Philosophy in some cases, but not all. It can also be politics, science, art itself, or a lot of other things.

We'll get to that later.

In the meanwhile, I've got a narrative to take care of: "Let me tell you what happened."

At the dawn of history, back with woolly mammoth guy, we had very slow transfer of information. Stories were related from mouth to ear—"Let me tell you what happened"—or WGM invited you up (actually down) to his place to see his cave paintings. Narratives that are entirely oral are hard-pressed to last very long, and there's obviously no way someone in Cairo can easily check out the cave paintings in Lascaux. Fortunately, at some point, we became capable of saving information through writing (we also became capable of saving art better than hiding it on subterranean cave walls, but for the moment we'll concentrate on writing).

The written word, once it was invented, allowed the transmission of Narrative through time and space. Literally, through time. Literally, through space. The written word, on papyrus say, could be carried anywhere. Geography didn't matter any more. The Narrative could be copied over. It could be saved. It could be read a hundred years after the writer died. It could be read five thousand miles away. So what was written, the Narrative, survived the narrator's life and traveled through time, and went beyond the geography inhabited by the narrator.

Narrative became portable through time and space. Narratives became Texts.

A Narrative is a story. A Text is a permanent version of that Narrative, a permanent version of that story.

We can now evaluate a Text, irrespective of time and space.

Narrative, as Text, takes on a life of its own, beyond the teller.

This concept of Text is a cornerstone of postmodern criticism. You study the Text. The sub-Text. The con-Text. The Text tells you as much about the narrator as it does about the connected dots. (A pomo could never simply study lower-case text, or unhyphenated subtext—that would be tantamount to admitting the whole thing is a French plot.)

So, let's start looking at some narratives, or, if you prefer, some Texts. We will start with what I'll call the Classic Age, beginning with the great ancient civilizations up through the Renaissance (which is simply the nominal rebirth of the Classic Age). It is a busy but fairly straight-line two thousand years.

As we saw before, the original narratives from woolly mammoth guy about the world around him were pretty basic, and to our eyes, not very accurate. In the Classic Age narratives get more complex for two reasons.

The first reason is because we had more and better information. Our scientific, data-gathering skills had improved, so we were more knowledgeable about the dots we were connecting. The dots of perceived objective reality became more objectively real as our perceptions improved, and the connections between them made more sense. If certain aspects of Narrative creation are a search for objective truth, we were now in a better position to attempt that search.

The second reason narratives got more complex is because we learned how to connect the dots better. We became better narrators. What happens is that once we have texts—those narratives that are mobile through time and space—those texts are not independent of each other. They don't exist in a vacuum. One text builds on the next text. The style of text creation, the *how* of text creation, becomes better-known, and leads to stylistic developments, i.e., the development of the *art* of narration.

One last caveat: we are discussing Western civilization henceforth. The narratives of Islamic nations or Hindu nations or Buddhist nations took historically different routes because of differing content. If nothing else, the importance of religion to culture, and the differences among these religions and Christianity, combined with their relative isolation from one another at the time, is enough to have taken them in radically different Narrative directions. Ultimately the modern cross-cultural analyst will attempt to find the similarities of disparate civilizations, but that is beyond the scope and intent of this essay.

“Let me tell you what happened...”

Thought.

Thought is going to be one of our areas of Narrative study. This is the area of the intellectual concepts underpinning and driving a culture.

The most important area of Thought to a culture is probably its religion. Religion is an attempt to understand and explain the nature of existence itself. Parse that sentence, and remember what we've said so far: Religion is an attempt to **[understand and explain] [connect the dots of] [create a narrative about]** (pick one) the nature of existence itself.

In religion, the Texts come directly from God. In literate societies there are often human writers possessed of what is called divine inspiration who write the Narrative as if taking dictation from the Almighty, but completed Texts can also be directly handed by a divinity to a human (much as Prometheus gave mankind fire). In less developed, non-literate societies, the word of God is interpreted by shamans or the like who have some direct line to the divine. None of these concepts is particularly different from the others. In all of them, the Texts come from God.

The sacred Texts do two things: they provide a narrative, usually of creation, often also of some otherworldly spiritual existence that cannot be directly perceived by humans on earth. Belief in this Narrative, since it connects no dots of any perceived objective reality, is not easy. It requires what religions refer to as faith, a leap beyond our instinct to Narrative, since these Narratives do not fall into the normative categories of Narrative, at least as we've explained them.

The second thing the sacred Texts do is provide guidelines for living. Laws or rules for proper behavior are laid out directly as such in the Texts, or provided indirectly through expert interpretation of the Texts by spiritual/religious leaders/scholars. These laws, like the Narratives of the spiritual world, are given to us by the Divine, and presumably enforced by the Divine.

In religion, in other words, the Narrator is God. The importance of the Narrative, therefore, is paramount to not only human but all existence. The nature of the Narrator trumps the nature of the Narration.

These stories are important ones. Intrinsically.

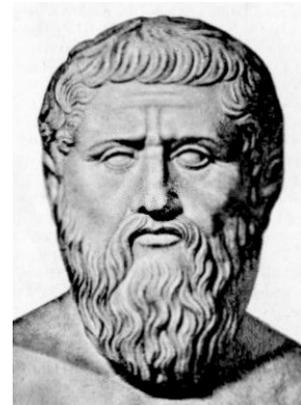
Philosophy is closely related to religion in that it is an attempt, first, to understand the nature of reality (on the secular level rather than the spiritual level) and, second, to provide ethical standards, but in this case removed from divine imperatives.

In Religion, God tells us stuff. In Philosophy, we try to understand stuff for ourselves. This can include understanding God; philosophy is not atheistic, but it is logical. Premises must be clear and acceptable on face, and conclusions must derive from logic.

Philosophy posits this problem: The universe has a set of rules—what are they? (Although philosophy can go further, and even ask if the universe does indeed have a set of rules, most people, and most philosophers, accept this a priori. It certainly *seems* as if there are rules, and the more we learn about science, the clearer the rules become. But there are serious philosophers who question universal rules, and even scientists who wonder which came first, the universe or universal rules. But we'll leave such noodling for a different discussion.)

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are the Big Three of ancient Western philosophy. Feel free to read into them, perhaps starting with Plato's Republic.

For now, let's look at a little bit of Plato. I think of Plato primarily as an ethicist, but he does manage to throw together a good old-fashioned stew of ideas on the nature of existence, most



notably his theory of Forms. Let us turn, for a moment, to the Encyclopedia Britannica:

The theory of Forms has as its foundation the assumption that beyond the world of physical things there is a higher, spiritual realm of Forms, or Ideas, such as the Form of Beauty or Justice. This realm of Forms, moreover, has a hierarchical order, the highest level being that of the Form of the Good. Whereas the physical world, perceived with the senses, is in constant flux and knowledge derived from it restricted and variable, the realm of Forms, apprehensible only by the mind, is eternal and changeless. Each Form is the pattern of a particular category of things in this world; thus there are Forms of man, stone, shape, color, beauty, and justice. Yet the things of this world are only imperfect copies of these perfect Forms.

To Plato, there is an ideal, and reality is the expression of these ideals. There are Forms—of man, stone, shape, color, beauty, justice—in some heavenly spiritual place, while in reality, we have men and stones and shapes and colors and various levels of beauty and justice, imperfect copies of the spiritual Forms. The Forms are hierarchic, and the highest Form is the Good.

One way to look at this is to look at round objects. According to Plato, a circle would be the ideal of roundness, or more specifically, the Form of the shape we call roundness. Round items that we come across in our real-life general existence are merely expressions, to some specific extent, of the Form of roundness. We can measure how close something is to being perfectly round, so we can measure how round it is. The item with the most possible roundness is the closest to pure Form of the circle, which exists only on the higher spiritual realm. We measure something's circularity by determining how much of the Form of roundness it contains. Similarly, if we want to measure how beautiful something is, we measure how much Beauty it contains. There is more or less Beauty, or Roundness, of Justice, or whatever, in our real world items/examples. The Forms are the ideals of those concepts. It is probably worth noting that if we want to study Forms, we probably can't study the real world. If we want to study the shape of roundness, for instance, we need to study pure circles, and we use mathematics to do so, mathematics being entirely a process of mind. Plato, being a philosopher, was big on the intrinsic processes of the mind. After all, that was his main line of business.

Now I don't want to burst anyone's balloon here, folks, but what Plato is saying probably isn't true. It is, however, Plato's attempt to connect the dots of perceived reality. His idea is that reality is an imperfect copy of some better realm. There is a lot of logic in the idea that a thing may partake of a certain amount of Beauty or Good or Justice, without ever approaching total (Platonic) Beauty or Good or Justice. It is clear from this formulation of dot connections that old Plato was definitely in the business of trying to figure out right from wrong.

Plato also writes of ethical concerns quite directly, the rules for organizing and running a government. I'm no great Plato scholar, so I won't go into much detail, but he was big on, well, Philosopher kings, probably because that would work well for him. (If he had been a plumber, I suppose he would have pushed for Plumber kings.) Plato is a man of his times, and envisions the best society as a hierarchic set of three classes corresponding to the three aspects of humanity. His idea of the individual is a fiction, made up whole cloth (i.e., that the individual soul breaks down into three parts, reason, appetite, and spirit). In this fiction he really gives no thought to the individual as an individual (or, therefore, to the ethical concerns of individual rights). He wants a

nice strictly stratified society, but keep in mind that his contemporary democracy was limited (to fully paid-up males of both sides Athenian descent). No one, not even Plato, lives outside of his own times. He only had the Narrative of his times, and his own dot-connecting abilities, to work with.

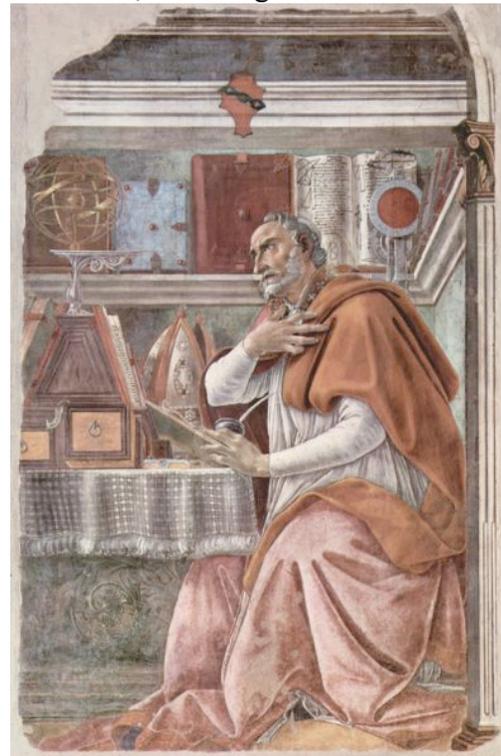
Plato's philosophy (or any philosophy, for that matter) is a search for a better narrative, a better understanding of the perceived objective universe. Regardless of how well their specific ideas hold up today², the Greeks were great thinkers, and they thought about a lot of stuff. And, as the leading culture of the time on their part of the globe, they spoke for the entire western world: It is with the Greeks that the west becomes a unit. Alexander, known to one and all as a Great guy, knitted together a nice military empire that defined, for the first time, Western Civilization. Plato's (and his compatriots') ideas were the leading thoughts of the day, and are still read, and still have value, today. And they informed much of the Thought that followed.

The question arises, how religious were the ancient Greeks? And the answer is, it's hard to pin down. They did indeed believe in a spiritual world, and while the narratives of the myths are not necessarily meant to be taken as whole-cloth truth (many were created by dramatists and readjusted on an ad hoc basis for their own ends), the gods *were* perceived as real. The fact that the Greeks had no word for religion may or may not be telling.

The Narrative of Philosophy, the connecting of the dots that comprise the nature of the universe, continues for us thus: the religion, such as it was of the ancient Greeks, transmogrified into the religion, such as it was, of the ancient Romans. The Romans inherited the leadership of the western world from the Greeks, borrowed much of their thought and translated it into Latin without much embellishment, and went on from there broadening the scope of Western civilization even further. Zeus becomes Jupiter, Hera becomes Juno, and so forth and so on. Not much changes until the spread of Christianity, and the point at which the Roman Empire becomes, officially, Christian.

And this is an important juncture. Given the nature of the relationship of the Greeks to religion, the Greek philosophers can cogitate on religion rather cavalierly, and separate religion from philosophy. But with the Christians, probably beginning with St. Augustine, religion takes on an intellectual importance that transcends secular thought. This is not to say that prior to Augustine people might not think of religion as all-important, but after Augustine, this all-importance is a done deal.

Augustine's major work on this subject is *City of God*. Augie makes the claim that salvation of the soul is the most important thing, i.e., gaining admittance to the City of God. The secular world,



² Plato's forms have a marginal similarity to semiotic metaphors. Come back here later and reread the EB discussion after you think you understand semiotics.

government, all that sort of thing, is at a lower remove (and even evil). Saving your soul means living forever with God. In the light of this, earthly existence is pretty small potatoes. If you've got any sense in your head, you will concentrate on eternal life. Everything temporal pales in comparison to eternal salvation.

And, as far as the development of Thought is concerned on the time line of Western civilization, that is exactly what happens. Religion becomes the driving force of society via the Narrative of personal salvation. The dots of the perceived reality of salvation are intrinsically more important than any other dots, since salvation is eternal and temporal things are, well, temporal.

Philosophy, for all practical purposes, is dead. That particular Narrative doesn't matter any more.

Religion rules. Nothing else matters.

Art

The history of art is a Narrative that can help explain the development of modern thought. History is the collection of random narratives of what happened; the history of art is the collection of random narratives of what happened among artists.

Why artists? Why art?

Artists, because artists can be the greatest thinkers of their time.

Art, because Art is Narrative. The artist selects from random data, connects some dots, and provides a result. Sounds like a Narrative to me.

It is Art that contains the Texts of a culture, be those Texts literally words, or be they visual, or aural. When we say Narrative is portable over time and geography, we are really saying that Art is transportable across time and geography. You can study Art irrespective of Narrative, but it's hard to imagine studying Narrative irrespective of Art.

Art is a lot of other things too. We won't go into those. But you should do so on your own. Pick whichever Art you like. There's plenty of it to go around.

Just because a Narrative *can* be saved across time and geography doesn't mean it will be, or should be. A particular Narrative needs to be especially valued for some reason in order to make it worthwhile for someone to bother transporting it. Religious and philosophical Narratives are valued for their content, and therefore survive time and geography. Art is also valued for its content, so it too is able to survive time and geography, but usually only if its content is worth valuing. We don't save junk, in other words. In Art, we save the good stuff, or what was considered good at the time of its creation, or at some time along the way.

Ancient art is easy for us to discuss, because we're not going to go into it too deeply. Superficial analysis allows us to generalize and dabble and have a little fun without exactly hurting our brains.

Some facts. First, as far as ancient art is concerned, there isn't all that much of it around anymore. Let's start the Egyptians, which is about as far back as we need to go.

What do the ancient Egyptians have in the way of art? Statues and wall paintings, pretty much, plus some big monuments.

Let's move on to the ancient Greeks. What do the ancient Greeks have in the way of art? Statues and wall paintings, pretty much, plus some big monuments.

Let's move on to the ancient Romans. What do the ancient Romans have in the way of art? Statues and wall paintings, pretty much, plus some big monuments.

Well, there's 2000 years of art history in a nutshell.

There is, in fact, thematic unity among the ancients in terms of content, and great growth in terms of expression. The Narrative remained the same but the Narration improved dramatically.

The Narrative remained the same because all their art was mostly about the same things.

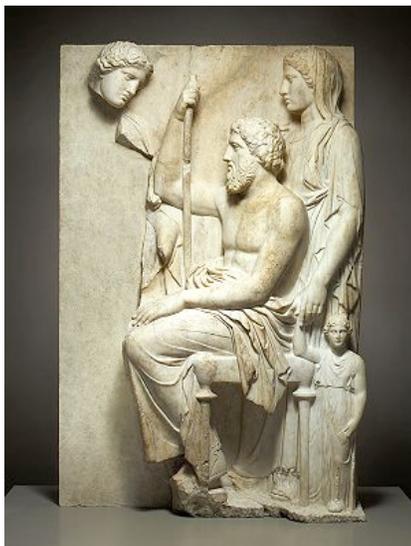
Think of the Egyptians. Their art is about the pharaohs and the gods. If there's a picture of the average working schlub, he's working in aid of the pharaohs and the gods. Think about the



style of the pictures: flat. No perspective. Even their sculpture is less than realistic. Why? Did they like abstraction? No. It's just that they didn't know how to do it any better. Look at their monuments. The pyramids. These are, indeed, monumental in scope, and rather startling feats of engineering. They are not, however, particularly complicated in terms of structure. The pyramids may have lasted thousands of years, but all they are is a stack of bricks. They've lasted because, structurally, a cleverly assembled pile of bricks can't fall down. Their ancient temples are big and thick, lots of walls and columns to hold up the ceiling, so large that you feel dwarfed by them but not particularly elegant. Great feats of engineering but not particularly complicated in terms of structure. Much of these, by the way, *have* fallen down.

A smart kid with a load of wooden bricks can build structures as complicated as the ancient Egyptians. And, oh yeah, these structures are also about pharaohs and gods.

Cut to the Greeks. Their art is about kings and gods and heroes (demigods). If there's a picture of the average working schlub, he's working in aid of the kings and gods and heroes.



Think about the style of the pictures: still flat. Still no perspective. But look at their sculpture. Unlike the Egyptians, classical Greek sculpture, which comes along later on the timeline, is quite realistic. The human anatomy is portrayed correctly. Why? Because the Greeks learned how to do this. Scientifically, they knew more about anatomy than the Egyptians. They had better science. And they had better sculpting techniques as skill in narrating through sculpture improved. (Needless to say, Egyptian sculpture also gets "better" over time, if better is reflected in its realism.)

Greek sculpture is about kings and gods and heroes. The Narrative remained the same, but the Narration improved dramatically.

Look at their monuments. They improved on the Egyptians, and came up with better columns. With the Egyptians, columns are random poles holding up roofs. The Greeks thought out what became classical forms and gave us Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian

columns.

As with the Egyptians, the point of the columns was to hold up the roofs. Most of the great Greek buildings, like the Egyptian ones, have fallen down. Only the columns remain.

And, oh yeah, those structures are also about kings and gods and heroes.

Let's face it. If you're going to build BIG, you need a good reason, and you need money and resources. The chief concerns of a culture, its government and its religion, are the most likely to be able to generate those resources. That's why big buildings are historically related to government and religion, because government and religion are important dots in the Narrative of a culture.



Why do I like to talk about Architecture? Good question.

Architecture is a fascinating subject for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is a problem of science, to wit, building a structure that does not fall down. (There's nothing an architect hates more than his building falling down. That takes all the fun out of it.) Secondly, architecture is *big*. A house is big. Even a hut is big, compared to other manmade items. But architecture also includes radically big buildings much bigger than huts and houses. Cultures as a whole build a certain number of big buildings that are strongly representative of that culture. A vast, big, complicated structure takes money, resources, time, energy, all in vast quantities. Why a culture chooses to build that building says much about that culture. As does how they build that building. A building is, by default, an important Text that we, as Narrative experts, should study closely, regardless of when it is built. Scale changes over time; today we build plenty of big buildings that dwarf the big buildings of the ancient Greeks, but we still build only a handful of mega-buildings that dwarf these big buildings, and they say much about us. As does every building we build.

Architecture is a very talky narrative.

Let's move on to your ancient Romans. Their art is about emperors and gods and heroes yet again. Their painting, such as remains to us, is a bit more realistic than painting preceding it, but keep in mind that painting tends to be decorative in these times. That is, you paint pictures on the walls or on the dinner dishes. Someone will have to invent canvases if we want real portability of paintings.

As for their sculpture, not much different from the Greeks. Once you learn anatomy, you've learned it. An ab is an ab no matter how you slice it. By the way, don't think that all this ancient sculpture is as austere as it appears to us. These guys did have paint, and colored up a lot of these things. Paint doesn't last on a sculpture for thousands of years, especially if the sculpture is exposed to the elements. Paint on a house doesn't last all that long, for that matter, which is why housepainters don't go out of business even today.

Aside from their drains—and there is no question that the Romans did have a knack for moving water, be it to drink or to irrigate or to keep the bathrooms tidy, (and they loved a good bath, too)—what the Romans brought to the building table was the arch.

Finally someone figured out a way to keep the roof on the building.

Better still, finally someone figured out a way to put some space *inside* the building. When a roof is held up by columns and walls, the bigger the roof, the more columns and walls you need. It gets pretty claustrophobic. With a dome, which is a 360-degree arch, all you need is one set of walls.

What the arch does is push stress down to the sides. That is, if my roof is a dome, comprised of arches, all the pressure of the roof goes down through the walls holding up the dome. I can build a much larger expanse of dome, supported only by the walls, than I can of flat ceiling. A flat ceiling pushes weight down evenly across its plane. So a flat ceiling must be either so small that its weight doesn't overwhelm its supports, as in a small hut, or else a flat ceiling must have a lot of supports. Once you invent the dome, you suddenly have a lot of space.

Space is nice in a building.

(Keep in mind, by the way, that the building materials here are rocks. Stones. Bricks. They weigh a lot. Modern roofs are another story altogether, because of the building materials' not weighing so much. We'll get back to that later.)

As with the Greeks and Egyptians, the Romans also used columns to hold up the roofs in some buildings. Most of the great Roman buildings, like the Greek and Egyptian ones, have fallen down. Only the columns remain. Except for the ones with the domes.

The Pantheon (pictured above) still stands in the middle of Rome. It's about 2000 years old. And it's in pretty good shape.

And, yeah, those structures are also about emperors and gods and heroes.

As for Narrative, remember fiction? Fiction was the collection of random narratives of things that didn't happen, Narrative for Narrative's sake, to fulfill that innate desire for narration.

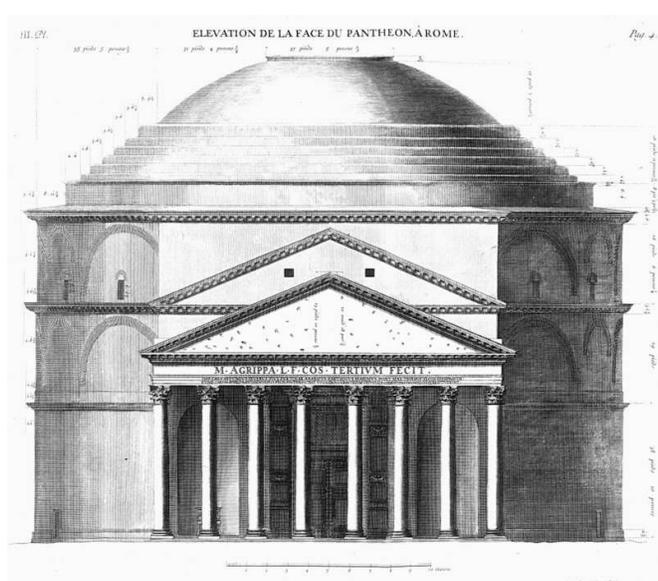
"Let me tell you what happened."

Except that it didn't happen.

In civilized society in the classic age, people can not only create narratives, they can also read and study pre-existing narratives. But literacy, the literal ability to read, is restricted to a small number of people, and texts are hard to reproduce. In a world of few written documents, and few readers, the literate tend to concentrate on the important texts, that is, the handful of texts that are the cornerstones of culture, the key narratives documenting Thought. The Bible, for instance.

However, there is a way around this lack of literacy (short of teaching everyone to read) that also allows us to create a permanent version of the narrative. If we want to tell a story that didn't happen, we create theater. You don't need to be literate to be in an audience. As a result, Drama is the first great narrative art form, Art as art, Narrative as narrative.

In Drama, there really is a story. There is really is a narrative. Capital N Narrative is finally as easy to comprehend as it will ever be.



Both Plato and Aristotle talked about the value of literature. Plato didn't think much of it, and that was the end of that. Dinner and a show was not his idea of a fun date. Aristotle, on the other hand, said that Drama was good because it allowed for catharsis.

Catharsis—the purging of the emotions.

Encyclopedia Britannica again—“Through experiencing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the spectator's own anxieties are directed outward, and, through sympathetic identification with the tragic protagonist, his insight and outlook are enlarged. Tragedy then has a healthful and humanizing effect on the spectator or reader.”

Compare vicarious (Webster's): “Experienced or realized through imaginative or sympathetic participation in the experience of another.”

Through Drama, we get our thrills through someone else's experience. We grow as humans by learning about and sharing the emotions of tragic heroes.

Maybe this is one of the reasons why we like a good story, or maybe this somehow helps explain the instinct to Narrative. Narrative outside ourselves has an emotional effect within ourselves. If somebody jumps out at me from behind a tree, I am scared. If somebody jumps out at a movie actor from behind a tree, the actor acts scared, but I'm scared too. Except I have no reason to be scared.

Yet I continue to go to scary movies.

Catharsis.

Aristotle also delineates the unities, i.e., the rules, or the classic approach, if you will. There's more to it than this, but simply put, drama has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A narrative builds up to a climax (and eventually provides catharsis).

What Aristotle is doing, in other words, is laying out the **form** of what is it that makes a good story.

Forms again. Classical forms.

Because we begin to understand the forms, because we begin to understand how drama is supposed to work, we get that much of a better understanding of text creation. That is, if I wish to write a drama, I know from Aristotle not to put the big dramatic climax in the beginning. I need to build up to it. I also need to come down from it (in what Aristotle called the anticlimax).

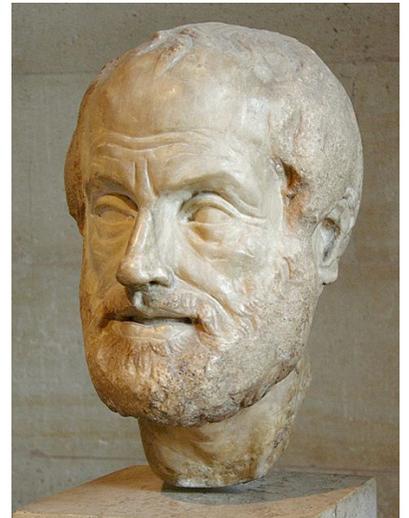
Writers, creators of narrative, learn from the creators of Thought. They can also use experience: they can read a previous text, and improve on it.

Over time, texts build on one another and, presumably, get better. Just like sculpture got better. Just like architecture got better.

Do I have to say it?

Drama in ancient times was about kings and gods and heroes.

Quelle surprise, as they say in France.



The Middle Ages

The Classical Age is followed by a period we loosely refer to as the Middle Ages. Medieval Times. Or my personal favorite term, the Dark Ages.

What we're really referring to here is the period between the end of the influence of the Roman Empire over the West, and the beginning of the Renaissance, when the West is "reborn." Hence "middle." This view of history concentrates on "great civilizations" as compared to, say, everyday life. There was plenty of everyday life in the West during this period, but not much great civilization. In Europe there was no longer a central civic body of organization like the Roman Empire, which kept everybody loosely federated through military force and alliances, and geographically connected through a network of roads, the ruins of which are still visible through Europe and even England. The great civilization of the moment, Islam, while it did make some inroads into Europe, was primarily somewhere else, based on traditions other than the Greco-Roman.

In Europe, this is a period of small warlords and feudalism, of small civic units evolving into nations. The underlying historical Narrative is diverse, and not germane to our discussion, with the exception of thought and architecture, which we'll discuss briefly.

While the Middle Ages may be a period devoid of central government, it nonetheless does have one extremely important Narrative cultural determinant: Christianity. It is not so much that everyone has suddenly become Christian—the ongoing conversion of the West lasts way beyond the Renaissance—but enough of them do, and religion, as we have seen, is a prime force.

In Thought, there are two main streams. The religious one is Faith. The secular one is Reason. Plato and his cronies used reason to attempt to understand the universe. Augustine and his successors used faith. Not that they didn't apply reason to their faith, but they knew that reason could only go so far, and their belief in God and their drive for salvation were prioritized above their need to reason things out.

So let's give this period another name other than the Middle Ages. Let's call it the Age of Faith.

We will not be the first ones to do that. Too bad, because it's really catchy.

The Age of Faith.

(Spoiler Alert: Sooner or later we will arrive at the Age of Reason.)

Architecture, as we have said, is a commanding expression of the Narrative of a culture because of its demands on resources. In the Age of Faith, the greatest works of architecture are cathedrals. (The only other major works are castles, which occasionally have great similarities to cathedrals, and often great dissimilarities, but we'll stick to cathedrals because, for the most part, their story is more interesting.)

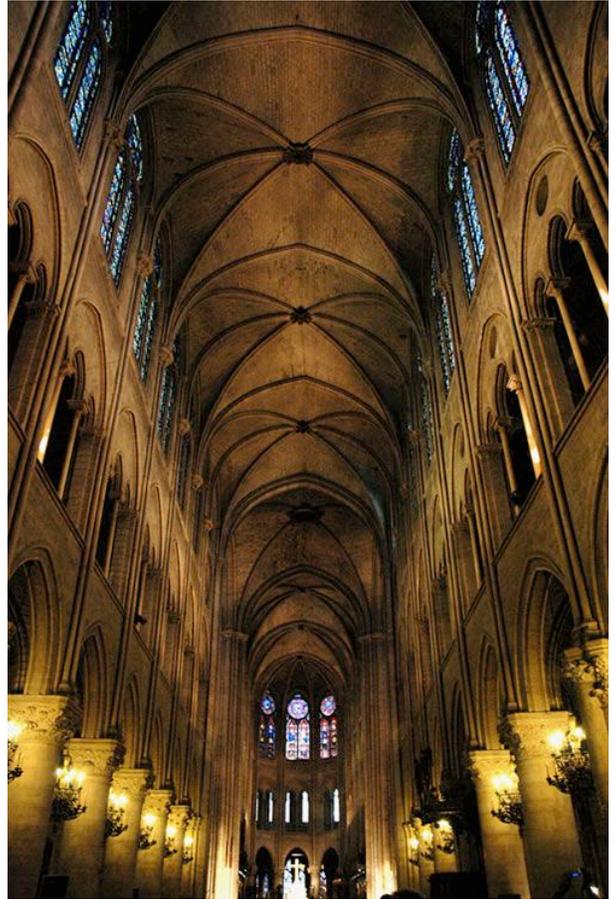
Think about Notre Dame de Paris. It was built (on an existing structure) from 1160 to 1250. Almost a hundred years of construction (not to mention another subsequent hundred years of improvements after 1250). No one who designed or planned or worked on the cathedral when it started was alive when it was finished. This was not a work of man, as far as the Narrative is concerned: it was a work for God.

The point of a great church is to provide a public space for communication with the spiritual. A sense of space, of heaven, of the ethereal, makes that communication seem that much closer. The great architects following the Roman Empire learned a few improvements on the

dome, and also learned how to prop up walls (and hold up roofs) in other ways. All these buildings are masonry, remember, which means rock-heavy. Strong walls are needed, or strong supports for the walls. Propping up the walls meant buttresses holding up the walls to take the stress of the roof away from the walls and divert it even further. So a buttressed wall can be higher, and the roof bigger. Inside the building, there is that much more space, especially UP—where God is. Everything about a medieval church is there to inspire awe. And it still does, even today. Many of the great cathedrals have not (yet) fallen down.

The Narrative of the cathedral is not merely the ephemeral sense of space and spirit. There are the deliberate religious narratives of statuary and stained glass and painted walls. Often the shape of the building itself tells a story. Many a classic cathedral is cruciform: in the shape of a cross. This was not an accident.

Which means that everything about the cathedral—its size and shape and decoration—is part of the Narrative of the Age of Faith.



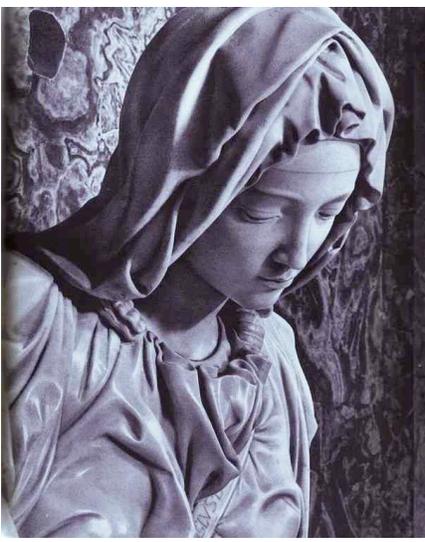
The Renaissance

Without going too much into cause and effect, the Dark Ages/Middle Ages/Age of Faith ended, and we have a rebirth of Western civilization, which is called the Rebirth.

Well, actually it's not. Even though that's what it was, many scholars found this to be less than mellifluous, so they christened it the Renaissance, which sounds so much nicer because it's French.

Damned Frenchies!

A couple of key things are happening at this time. Countries are being formed from old tribal groups / warlords / feudalistic arrangements. Vast trade routes have been opened up both on land and sea, and Italy becomes central to Western Civilization again at least partly because of its position on those trade routes. The Pope is probably the strongest monarch of the Age (after going through hell in a hand basket, including a period of feuding multiple popes). There is a rediscovery of old knowledge—scientific, philosophic, historical—that has been closeted during the Age of Faith (although the Renaissance is in a way the apotheosis of that Age), and classical literature and forms and studies return with a vengeance. Thanks to Gutenberg and movable type, which are much more effective than monks copying by hand in unmovable monasteries, we get easily reproducible books to share the ideas of the time.



In art, we have the culmination of the classical in the sculpture of the time. Think Michelangelo: David. Moses. The Pieta.

We also get painting. Or at least paintings that still exist. Think Michelangelo: the Sistine Chapel. Before long we'll have paintings on canvases, that we can move from place to place. Painters at this time master such things as perspective, so now there's a sense of three dimensional depth. They master the craft of paint mixing so that their work lasts and

looks realistic. The invent composition, the sense of putting the elements of a painting together in such a way to by (classically) pleasing to the eye.

Of course, all art is still about Gods and Heroes. Sorry about that. But as much as the Renaissance is about the rebirth of the classical, it is also a period where art is reflective of the main concerns of society, to wit, the dominance of the church in the culture. It is better, as I said, to see the Renaissance as the apotheosis of the Age of Faith as much as its replacement along a time line. We still have Faith, but now we have more. We're beginning also to have knowledge.

You should take a trip to Italy. If you're really clever, you should take a trip to Italy around the year 1565, but the present is fine, too.

Once you get past the food, take a look at the art. You can't miss it, because it's everywhere. It seems to contain the sum total of the Christian Faith. It contains the main beliefs, and it contains the legends. When Mary is assumed into heaven, for instance—assumption is when God calls up your earthly remains; Enoch and Elijah were also assumed—she often dangles a cord behind her, while the apostle Thomas is seen in the distance running down a hill, not wanting to miss the event of Mary's dormition (the sleep unto death). Try to find any of that in the Bible! But you'll find it regularly in the paintings of the Assumption. Art takes on not only a unique language, that is, a Narration, such as skill in painting, but a vocabulary, i.e., dots of meaning, symbols that are meaningful only if, well, you know what they mean.

Walk around Italy and stare at 800 Marion Assumptions, and 700 times you'll see a cord and poor Tommy running down a hill in the distance or one way or another showing up too late, and you won't have a clue to what it means. If you did take the trip in 1565, however, you would know about the cord and about Thomas without having to read the explanations in the guide books. It would be common knowledge.

That's just one example of the arcana inherent in this art. It is of its time, and often it is hard for us today to read the complete Narrative without a little help. That may be why an

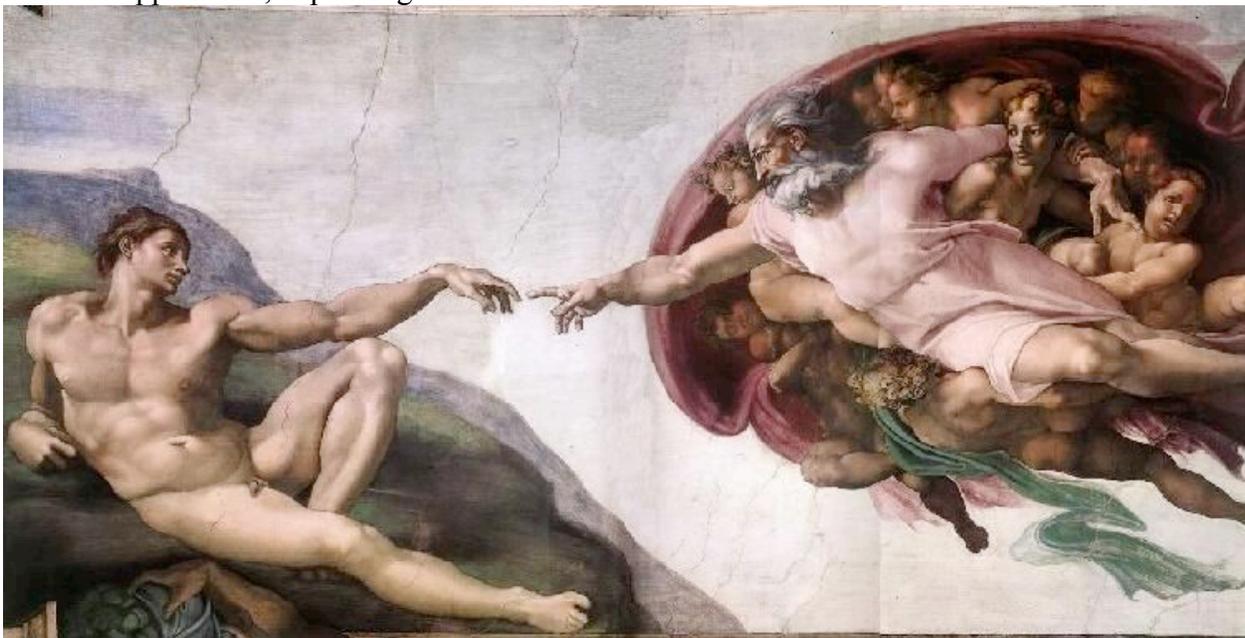


appreciation of Fine Arts is so rare: It isn't easy. I don't want to suggest that all good things are hard, but not all easy things are good, and sometimes you have to work a little to appreciate something.

Sort of like reading all of the back story of Caveman to get to the good stuff about postmodernism. If, indeed, postmodernism is good stuff.

Bear with me.

You'll see some great things on this Italy trip. You'll see the Creation, if you visit the Sistine Chapel. You'll see horns on Moses' head more often than not; that's how you can tell it's Moses (and you can look it up for yourself why Moses is displayed as having horns; I don't want to have to explain *everything* in one essay). You'll see a lot of Annunciations, and if you're like me, you'll become a great fan of angel wings. Are they rainbow colored? Feathers? Light? Lots of different approaches, depending on the artist.



In your travels you will see every Bible story you can imagine, as well as some that you've never heard of; apocrypha, like the tales of the Assumption, gets its paintings too. You'll also see paintings of rich people, which will remind you that all this art is brought to you courtesy of the Medicis and their brethren. You can't devote your life to the creation of art without money behind you, and artists get money as either patronage or commissions, either from nobles or churches.

All the art is, in other words, still about plutocrats and God and heroes.

While you're still in Italy, visit the churches. Splendid, eh? That's where the public money went, of course. If it's 1565, listen to the music. You'll be sort of bored, because they really haven't invented music yet. Or more to the point, they haven't invented complex instrumentation and harmonies and rhythms. Lots of single line melodies with a steady beat line underneath it. It's really mostly folk music, although before long public money will start supporting musicians too, with either patronage or commissions, and we'll start getting something you can sink your teeth into.

It's a wonderful world, isn't it? This return to the classical state of mind that is the Renaissance led to invigorated art, invigorated science (think of all of Leonardo's drawings), invigorated culture. It is a state of order, with clear social hierarchies, with rigorous class systems, everything in its place, every person in their place. Not much has changed, in a way, since Plato, insofar as individual life is concerned. The kings and queens and clerics rule, the people follow, and in the end, we will go to heaven.

But things are about to change.

Goodbye, Age of Faith. Goodbye, Renaissance. Hello, Humanism.

Part Three

The Age of Reason

The Age of Reason differs from the Age of Faith, as we have said, with the shift from dependence on faith to dependence on rationality. You could begin throwing around words like ontology and epistemology now (the study of existence and the study of knowledge, respectively). But we won't. Read the original texts yourself if you want to start manipulating big words. Caveman is, deliberately, a Small Word analysis of things. It's a synthesis, a connection of the dots the way one narrator sees them.

Let me tell you a story.

I do not know what marks the turning point between Faith and Reason, and there probably is no one fulcrum. Cultural movements don't necessarily hinge on just one occurrence. There are certainly some big things one can point to, however. The revival of interest in the classical age during the Renaissance included a revival of interest in the classical writers, who were primarily secular, using reason to figure out existence. The Humanism movement during the Renaissance



studied the role of Man absent the realm of the spiritual. The invention of movable type meant that books became more readily available, which meant more people became literate and wrote more books, a progressive cycle of intellectual development. Exposure to other cultures through active international trade and exploration caused the mind to wonder about things. And Faith, or at least the power of the Catholic Church, certainly took a body blow when Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses to the church door.

Regardless of pinpointed causes, the end of classicism and the beginning of the Enlightenment is marked by the use of logic to figure out the universe. We will use our own brains, rather than following our spiritual texts. There is something intrinsic to this that may not be immediately clear, but if someone tells me what to do, I am a cog in a wheel not of my own creation. But if I use my own brain to figure out what to do, I am suddenly, inherently, an individual. I cannot think with someone else's brain! I could follow someone else's predetermined plan for my life, but at the moment I attempt to determine my own plan, I have crossed a chasm separating humanity as a whole from humanity as individuals.

This is true even of religion. One aspect of the Protestant Reformation is the claim that the Church is filtering dogma in an incorrect way, and that the Individual ought to read the Bible and figure things out on an individual basis. Even at the primary level of religion, therefore, we are beginning to get a large dose of individuality.

Going into the Age of Reason, the Individual is a fairly meaningless construct. The Age of Reason will spend much of its energy in the construction of the Individual as a meaningful concept. And by the time we reach the Modern Age, the Individual will be king. And god. And hero.

And all the art that always seems to be about kings and gods and heroes will be about the Individual.

The Age of the Individual is dawning.

Thought

We're going to cover the period from the Late Renaissance to roughly the turn of the 20th Century in a very short take. Lots happens in this 400 year period, but we're going to select some key dots to connect, focusing our story on Individualism. If we spend too much time here, we'll never get to Modernism. (This may or may not be a good thing.)

We've already mentioned the Protestant Reformation, which certainly shook the position of the single monolithic Church as the arbiter of Faith, if not necessarily the position of Faith in the culture overall. Faith was still important. What Reformation thinkers did was give thought to the role of the individual in the interpretations of scripture. Faith in the scripture itself was not in question.

But new philosophy was also beginning to happen, philosophy that approached existence rationally, through the use of human reason. Again, as we've said, the moment you apply reason to solving the problems of the universe, you are by definition applying a tool of Individuality. We only have our own reason to go by.

The chief tool of the rational philosopher, aside from his brain, is logic. If logic is not the enemy of Faith, it is certainly its opposite.

The philosophy of the 17th and 18th Centuries, while often accepting the existence of God, stands aside from God's existence. Descartes and the Scholastics believed that all of existence could be figured out through reason alone (Metaphysics). John Locke and his gang disagreed, saying that the world is revealed to us through our senses (Empiricism).

I guess you can pick for yourself which makes more sense. Neither side exactly managed to pin down existence so well that we didn't have to ever think about it again. In terms of the birth of Individualism, correctness doesn't matter. Using pure mind or using our experience of the world, we are doing it on our own.

Still, this sort of thing, metaphysics versus empiricism, is what gives philosophy a bad name. I mean, really, guys. This is just mental gymnastics on the part of the philosopher. And for us, reading their work, it's the mental gymnastics of watching some other mental gymnast. In the end, it's all just gymnastics. Nothing has actually happened, except the burning of some mental muscles. It is the practice of pure thought in aid of understanding pure thought. Good luck with that.

Subsidiary to ontological discussions of metaphysics and empiricism (now there's a phrase I can't believe I wrote), is the study of the individual per se. If the Individual is the source of

reason and experience, i.e. metaphysics and empiricism, some thought should be given to the Individual's place in the scheme of life as it is lived. As the Individual takes a new position of priority in society, since all we can know is what we can know as individuals, an ethicist like John Stuart Mill can conclude in his work that Individual Liberty is the highest value in a society, the ethically most important consideration, the most right/moral thing. The individual begins to precede society. And, according to Mill, the Individual has Rights. That's a new idea, although I don't know if Mill actually invented it. But probably Plato would not have agreed with it. With Plato, Society came first.

Along these Individualistic lines of J. S. Mill, Manny Kant, that jaunty German Herr about town, concluded that the goal of the Individual's existence is happiness. This is not the happiness (if any) that results from watching a Rob Schneider film, but the Right to an existence pleasing to the Individual on an individual basis. You know, the pursuit of happiness, in your own way. (The present Dalai Lama says exactly the same thing: this is very much an Eastern philosophy, at least in some countries, for some religions.)

J.S. and Manny did, of course, have a different feel about ethics. In the Age of Faith, God told you what to do, and there were no questions asked. But J.S. and Manny tried to figure out for themselves what made doing a certain thing right or wrong. J.S. embraced (but did not invent) Utilitarianism, which measures a calculus of pleasure and pain resulting from actions. (Utilitarianism gets a bad name in debate from people who know nothing about it aside from the catchy "The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number," an oversimplification.) Manny came up with a Deontological approach, measuring the act itself. The difference is simple: do we weigh the results of an action, or do we evaluate the action itself? Taking either line exclusively will take you to an ethical dead end, but studying each line will make you think more clearly about the difference between right and wrong.

Right and wrong? In the Age of Faith, God told us what was right and wrong. In the Age of Reason, we've got to figure it out for ourselves.

Possibly the most important thought to come down the pike from these rationalists is the concept of Government deriving its power from the governed (Locke), and not God. This idea directly changed the world. Historically, despots of every stripe liked to say that, when all was said and done, they were ruling not because they were the meanest bastards in the valley, but because God had blessed them or their lineage. The idea that government is a product of the people governed rather than something imposed upon the people by the might of the most powerful, is an idea that ended the world of monarchs and began the world of the self-ruled.

And you can't have self-rule without a self.

Art

We will now enter the Age of Romanticism. That does not mean an age of romantic love, but an age celebrating the individual, emotion, nature, revolution! In the prevalent Thought of the time, the Individual has moved to a place of prominence. Again we look at the arts, because the arts reflect the times. At some points, artists even lead the times.

This period too has a flowering of Narration. The Narratives get really good, because the Narrators learn better the skills of Narration. They have access to more and better narration tools,

and perhaps they are also inspired by the inherent Individuality of the times. They don't have to stick to kings and gods and heroes anymore!

Let's start with music. In the Middle Ages we had Gregorian chants, one line of melody droning up and down the scale. When we were roaming around Italy in 1565, we had some minstrel playing some simplistic stringed instrument and singing along in one simple line of melody. Organs had been around for hundreds of years, but by the time you get to Bach, you have a nice range of other keyboard instruments like harpsichords. With Bach we think of one of the first great bursts of musical Individualism, as old Johannus worked his way through every theoretical construct imaginable. He explored music as music: he would write a series of works in every key, say, or a series exploring two voices or three voices in different progressive combinations. At this point, music is still a little rigid rhythmically, but we have developed complex harmonies and instrumental voices. What is missing from the Baroque of Bach is that Romanticism that would develop after his death in 1750. By the time we get to the great 19th Century masters, beginning with Beethoven, the age of Romanticism, the allowance of the Individual to express Individuality, is at its peak.

The listener's reaction to music differs, too. The reaction to an emotionally moving piece like Tchaikovsky's Pathétique symphony is radically different from the intellectual reaction to a piece like a Bach Brandenburg Concerto. They are both musical, but one appeals to our brain, and another to our heart (if you'll allow me a Romantic way of expressing things).

The music of the Romantics tells us much about the composers. Bach's music doesn't tell us much about Bach at all (except that he was good at his job).

Oh, yeah. Bach worked for a church, and a lot of his stuff is, I guess, about kings and gods and heroes.

The Romantics' work is about whatever they wanted it to be about.

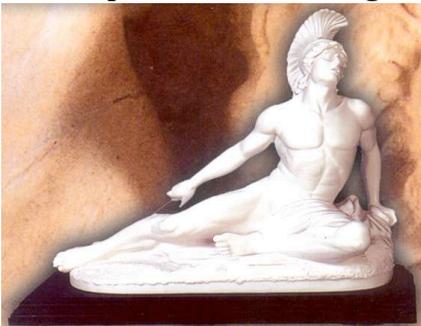
The Narrative of Literature may be the easiest to parse in the terms we've set regarding Narrative because, well, literature *is* narratives.

Duh.

We don't have to go into much detail at all here. We now enter the age of the creation of the normal hero. The Individual. The authors express themselves individually, and they write about individuals.

"I celebrate myself," says Walt Whitman.

Compare Achilles, star of the *Iliad*, to Mark Twain's Huck Finn or Jane Austin's Elizabeth Bennett. The demigod versus the American kid and the young middle class Englishwoman. The **concept of hero** has **changed dramatically** (in all literal senses of those bold-faced words). The



hero is no longer a king or a god; the hero is no longer special in terms of being separate from humanity. The hero now represents humanity. The hero is humanity. The hero is one single Individual, and our times have decided that one single individual is worthy of being a hero.

Name one kid in classical literature.
You can't.



Modern literature is *filled* with kids.

And working schlubs. And housewives. And people just like us.

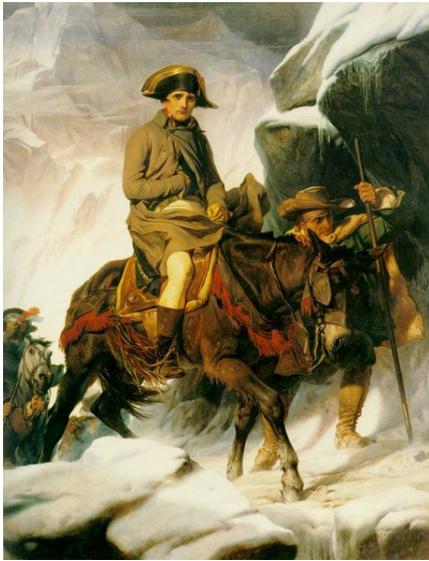
Literature has gotten *good*, too. It's fun to read. The skill set of the Narrator has brought to writing an immediacy never seen before. You are there, in your mind. It is happening to you.

Talk about catharsis! Talk about vicarious!

Yeah, the stories do have beginnings and middles and endings, with climaxes and anticlimaxes. Writers haven't fallen that far from the Aristotelian tree. Yet.

Then there's Fine Art. Just like literature has gotten good, so too has painting. Remember how sculpture got good when sculptors discovered anatomy? The same thing has happened to painting. What painters discovered was light.

In our Romantic Age, the subjects of art have changed, but a little more slowly than in literature. Where once upon a time every painting seemed to be a Madonna and Child, we've now got genre painting (scenes of everyday life), landscapes, portraits of normal people, lots of pretty stuff for the sake of pretty stuff. But for some reason, we haven't completely shed the old yet. We still have plenty of Madonnas and Greek myths and the like. Kings and gods and heroes. There is a conservatism and traditionalism in the arts of painting and sculpture that lasted well



into the 19th century, with all sorts of kings and gods and heroes still deemed the proper subject of art. This may be a continuing reflection of the operation of patronage and commission. Jane Austen became a good writer never leaving her room, and at little expense, whereas your average painter required a great amount of schooling in the craft of painting, and somebody had to pay for that one way or the other. And the people who buy paintings are the rich, whereas the people who buy books are merely the literate.

Nevertheless, while the content may be more classical, the art itself developed into the sublime. As early as Rembrandt, who died in 1669, painting has made incredible strides even from the time of Michelangelo, who died about a hundred years earlier. The realism, the understanding of light, the use of the paint, the use of brushes, all has changed.

It is with the Impressionists in the later half of the 19th Century that Romantic Individualism finally explodes in painting. In France prior to the Impressionists, the accepted wisdom is that paintings need to tell a moral tale. They have to have a meaningful narrative point. The art of the Impressionists had other goals. The celebration of the individual artist to do what he pleases, to connect on an emotional level with his viewers, this is what Impressionism does. The need to paint the "correct" subjects, the willful ignorance of which caused the Impressionists to be scorned by the art establishment of the time, came to an end. Correctness was completely overthrown by the



Impressionists, whose popularity endures through today. And the use of the tools, the use of color, the understanding of light (which is the definition of what the eye sees), the Narration, reaches what some consider its pinnacle.

We are now in an age that has been marked by revolution, in America and in Europe, revolutions resulting from the empowerment of the individual, rightly or wrongly, and the overthrow of the installed power structures. These revolutions have created the new western world of today's modern nations.

What does all this mean in terms of Narrative, which is our theme?

Narrative has gone from the big to the small.

Narrative is accessible to everyone.

Narrative is about everyone.

We are now in the world of the Individual. Most of the greatest works of art being created in all areas are individualistic. Narrative is, you might say, at its peak, as it is informed by individualistic movements

The greatest stories of all time, in literature, art and music, are 19th century-ish.

All of which is prologue to this essay. I've said it before. I don't think you can understand the Modern, until you understand how we got to it.

And we've finally gotten to it.

Part 4

The Modern World

For us, the modern world will begin with the machine age, as in post-Industrial Revolution, the nebulous point at which business has moved from the home to the factory, and the world is just beginning to see the machines and inventions that will dominate the 20th Century. I know you would like to pin this down exactly at some point between November 14, 1811 and May 8, 1926, but history doesn't have such nice neat chapters. If you're worried that the modern overlaps the pre-modern, don't. There is no bright line of modernity that we can cross from the old to the new. Our narrative instinct doesn't like this kind of vagueness, but the dots aren't always that easy to connect.

At this point, the big question is, with all that movement toward individuality that we saw in the arts and in politics, what is shaking in **Thought** that is going to make a difference?

We're not going to go into every detail of it, just as we didn't go into every detail of previous philosophies, but the big difference in the Modern world and what came before is the developing new approach to reality (and here there really is a bright line comparison between the old and the new). And to understand this, we have to think ontologically—we have to think about the nature of existence.

Let's go back a bit. The Empiricists, for instance John Locke, thought that we could know reality through the experience of our senses, that we could understand the objective world by living in it: breathing it, seeing it, hearing it, smelling it, touching it. The Rationalists thought that we could understand reality simply by using our minds to figure it out. The two groups are obviously fundamentally in disagreement about approach to ontology, but they did agree that there was an objective universe that could be understood.

By the time we get to the Modern Age, the most prominent theorists believe that there is no way of knowing the objective world. They take empiricism or rationality or any brand of thought you like and point out that it all boils down to you vis-à-vis you. That is, the only thing you can know is what it is that you, as an individual, know. Reality, to you, is your own subjective reality. As Kierkegaard put it, we have subjective existence modified by objective reality, but can only know the subjective.

This, in a word, is Relativism.

The objective world doesn't matter anymore because we can never know what it is. We can only know our subjective visions of it.

Taken to its logical extreme, the objective world may not even exist. And some postmodern thinkers do indeed posit that there is no objective reality. But Kierkegaard gives us a better construct. Our subjective reality is affected by the objective, but all we can truly know is the subjective. That is the core of Existentialism. From this, Sartre postulated that a man is defined by his actions, not his essence.

By the time we start analyzing the postmoderns, the construct of relativism is firmly fixed. You can read all the modern philosophy you want to get a better feel for it. As far as we're concerned now, you need only understand the concept, and understand that the concept pretty much underlies all of modern Thought.

All right. Let's focus in a little. Let's talk about the 20th Century. The Modern Age of the 20th Century.

As far as the Modern Age is concerned, it is important to remember that it is different from previous ages in dramatic ways (and this difference is a very important aspect of modernism). Before the Modern Age, everyone lived in their grandparents' world, which was *their* grandparents' world. That is, if you were born in 1700, your life was virtually no different from your parents' life, or their parents' life, or their parents' life, going back as far as you want. Technological advances were slow, and would have little effect on you. The biggest change in your century might be the development of a better plow. This means more rutabagas come rutabaga season, but not much else.

Starting with the Modern Age, your world is completely different from your grandparents', or even your parents'. Look at my grandmother. She was born in the early 1880s. The airplane had not been invented. Nor had the radio. Or the car. Or Coca-Cola (1886). When she died, in the early 70s, she could have theoretically watched a movie on the Concorde while drinking a Diet Coke. My grandmother's grandmother, however, lived through no such evolution of technologies (or beverages). Airplanes, radios, and cars (and television, among other inventions), changed the world in the Twentieth Century. In major ways. From, say, 1850 or so, there seems to be change after change after change, and they seem to come faster and faster. And this is still true. If you were born before 1990, you were born in a world where there was no Internet to log on to. If you were born before 1981, there was no PC. If, like me, you believe that the information transmission aspects of the Internet are a major revolution, than you probably have managed to have it occur entirely during your lifetime. (Considering that instant transmission of information requires a fast pipeline, and ubiquitous fast pipelines like cable modems are a product of the turn of the millennium, this particular revolution is still wearing virtual diapers.)

So what are some of the particulars of the Modern Age? Well, if information and knowledge are important, then the fact that news began to travel fast (compared to the past, although slow compared to us today), may be key. Look at the progression: word of mouth, Guttenberg, international sailing ships, telegraph and telephone, radio. Think about the difference in information processing with and without the Internet. Radio is a comparable historical difference.

By (loosely) the 20th Century, the Modern Age has become the age most (Western) people live in. And what are some of the important things that comprise that age?

- ∞ **Mechanization.** The world of manufacturing has become the world of assembly lines. No longer does a craftsman make a chair. A mindless human cog at point 27c on the assembly line screws in his assigned chair bolt.
- ∞ **Mass murder in warfare.** The American Civil War was only a local taste of the new meaning of war, where instead of a few professional troops maneuvering against one another, vast armies slugged it out for long periods at great human cost. World War I had a staggering effect on the European mind. Eight and a half million people died for little or no change in the geopolitical map (except, of course, the blaming of Germany and the ensuing World War II). A war that probably shouldn't have happened stripped nations of an entire crop of young men. Imagine the effect today if we took every single person in college and killed them. It would be comparable.
- ∞ **The end of colonialism.** Or at least the end of the nations of the West as they had been previously conceived. The kings were dead, mostly, or at least their power was

minimized. The adventures abroad were coming to an end. This is closely linked with the political aspects of WWI.

- ∞ **The rise of the communism.** The concept of the state is radically different under Marx than previously. Capitalism is the de facto fundamental underpinning of economics in the West from time immemorial. Communism is an attack on that fundament. And a successful one, transforming entire nations. Could there indeed be a world where the state was designed to support the worker and there was no such thing as private property?
- ∞ **The birth of popular culture.** The Modern Age begins to approach universal literacy. Everyone reads newspapers, anyone can read books. Radio allows music to reach a mass audience. Movies are a new art form, primarily for a mass audience. Suddenly there are such things as “bestsellers,” popular music (especially jazz, insofar as there’s an “intellectual” pop). This can be seen as tying into the mechanization, mentioned above. All those cogs in the automated factory are, at least, making a living, and popular culture is how they spend their money. (A Marxist might say it’s how they *waste* their money.)
- ∞ **Scientific breakthroughs.** Albert Einstein should probably get the credit for the most mind-boggling science, since he claimed that matter equals energy. He is also responsible for quantum (which he vilified) which claims that, essentially, the universe is based on probabilities rather than certitudes, and which therefore leads to the ultimate relativistic universe (reality is dependent on how you measure it, or even more simply, reality depends on you). It’s one thing when philosophers say the world is relativistic. It’s another thing altogether when scientists prove it. On the practical level, technology gives us automobiles, which allow people total personal mobility, and flight, which eliminates borders of time and space in much the same way as did the Theory of Relativity.
- ∞ **Urbanization.** The cities are growing as economies shift; people are moving away from their personal center (the farm they never ventured more than a few miles from). And cities are, metaphorically, a lot crueler than small towns.

The upshot of all of this is that world has gotten “bigger” and people feel “smaller.” People are no longer the center of the universe, they’re cogs again, the way Plato painted them in class systems. Except now they’re cogs in an inhuman, perhaps even inhumane, machine. In essence, we see a movement from humanism to dehumanization.

And now the conceptualized Modern Age can be examined. In the age of Humanism, we celebrated the individual. What do we do in the age of the Modern? How should things be done in this new world we have created? For us, in our history of Narrative, the story of stories if you will, how do the narrators—the artists—react? They’ve seen and lived in the Modern Age, and they also know and understand the past. What does the thinking artist do that is a “new” way?

What we will see is a redefinition of the creative process, or at the very least a new examination of those processes. And this redefinition defines, for us, modernism³. In these redefinitions, Narratives are taken to their extremes, and then past them. In pre-modernist

³ There is more than one definition of modernism, and we’re using this one. Modernist can also, among other things, refer to the science-fictiony designs of architecture from the 20s and 30s that you see spoofed in Disney World’s Tomorrowland. There’s distinctions between the word modernist and the word modernism. We’re loosey-goosey about this because we can be.

narrative, it was about the story, the content. In the modernist narrative, it's about the telling of the story.

In a nutshell, it's no longer about the narrative, it's about the narration. Underline that, circle it, mark it with a big star. **In a nutshell, it's no longer about the narrative, it's about the narration.**

“Let me tell you what happened.”

Painting

Let's take a look at painting in the pre-modern. Painting consists of a variety of basic concepts.

- ∞ There is composition, the way the painting is arranged. There are actually rules of composition, a compendium of right and wrong about the organization of elements in a design.
- ∞ There is perspective, which imparts realism to a painting, so it looks more lifelike.
- ∞ There are color and brush technique, the basic skill sets that the artist must master to have painting look right.
- ∞ Paintings can be used for record-keeping, for instance, capturing the portrait of a famous (or not famous) person or event.
- ∞ Storytelling. A painting can be a story of mythological gods and goddesses, or religious figures, or any events real or imagined.

The thinking artist looks at these concepts and asks, what do they mean? They are the accepted principles, but are they correct? Are they necessary? (And by the way, this raises the question, is the artist among the leading thinkers of the time? Since the great humanistic age, I would answer yes. If great thought is limited to great thinkers, it is sterile. Great thought must find its expression in great actions.)

One key issue facing painters at this point is the invention of photography. Whereas once, if a moment was going to be recorded historically, it was drawn, now it can be photographed, with infinitely more realism. A photograph can provide a completely accurate portrait of a sitter in minutes. Photography almost immediately becomes the de facto medium of record-keeping, replacing painting in this area, and replacing a *need* for painting in this area. And in many cases, photographs can also exist solely for the presentation of esthetic beauty, just like a painting.

If you're sitting around seriously thinking about art, about making a statement, how do you do it in the Modern Age? You throw out the old, stop thinking about the *subject* of the painting, and start thinking about the *process* of painting

You replace the importance of the narrative with the importance of the narration.

What if perspective didn't matter anymore?

Cubism is an attempt to create three dimensions in a painting (which is all that perspective is about). In Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," the subject of a painting is not only three-dimensional, it is now moving, no longer caught in time. Duchamp kills two birds with one stone (the static quality of a painting and the two-dimensionality).



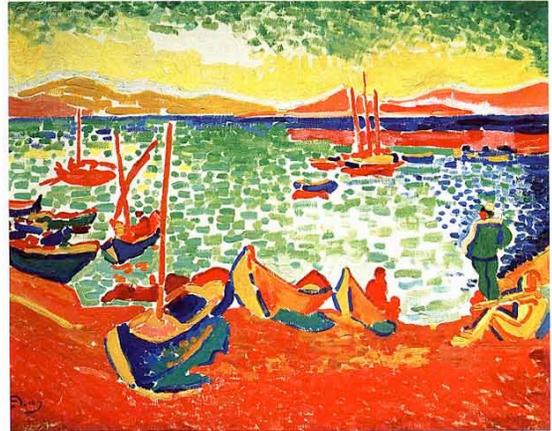


Look at Picasso, where a subject's eyes are both on the same side of the face. Picasso isn't saying that his subject is a flounder. He's questioning perspective, and turning it on its ear (or on its eyes).

What about paint itself?

In the old, we used paints in different colors to capture reality. Now, with the Fauves (the "wild beasts") color explodes on the canvas, and the painting is about color itself as much as its subject. Rather than mixing subtle realistic colors, wild colors are taken right from the tube.

In the old, you learned how to apply brushstrokes onto the canvas. In the new, you just splash the paint on the canvas like Jackson Pollack.



What about content?

In the old, the subject matter was clear. In the new, you have surrealism, the creation of a new alternate reality.

"My painting is visible images which conceal nothing; they evoke mystery and, indeed, when one sees one of my pictures, one asks oneself this simple question 'What does that mean?' It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable." - Rene Magritte

In the old, painting was about the subject matter, or about beauty, or both. A painting incorporated paint, brushstrokes, composition, perspective. Now, instead of painting a picture of gods or the neighbors or even the effects of light (the Impressionists), a painting is about painting. Or about paint, or about brushstrokes, or about composition or about perspective.

We have, obviously, invented abstract art. Where the painting is about the painting.⁴



⁴ There's more to art than painting, of course. Perhaps the best index of where we are with artists as thinkers in the Modern Age is Duchamp's Urinal. It's a real urinal. By signing it and hanging it on a wall, said Duchamp, it is now a

Music

There are comparable experiments/develops in the other arts. Noticeably, music becomes atonal, which is analogous to painting becoming abstract. Just as to the thinking visual artist new techniques were needed to replace the old, to thinking composers new scales were needed to replace the old ones. The simple elegant math of steps and half steps is invaded by science, for instance, and we get 12-tone scales. All the tools of the musician are open to discussion and replacement, as were all the tools of the painter.

One thing we didn't comment on with abstract art was whether or not it was aesthetically pleasing, i.e., pretty. Nor will we comment on whether atonal music is listenable. We are not here to criticize, but to assume that music is what musicians make.

4'33" (*Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds*) was a piece written by John Cage, who originally studied under Arnold Schoenberg, the creator of the 12-tone method. *4'33"* is entirely silent; it's name denotes its length. How much more abstract can music get?⁵

Architecture

Architecture remains fascinating in the Modern Age. Buildings become as modernist as abstract paintings or atonal music, and because the size of buildings make them impossible to disregard, their meaning turn modernism into public statements (and will, in the postmodern, be one of the great emblematic art forms).

Architecture has always been about the point or purpose of a building and the use of materials, a structural marriage of form and function. In the past, we have had the problem of holding up heavy masonry ceilings and walls. With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution we get the next great phase of architecture, incorporating the use of cast iron and steel. Higher, broader and lighter buildings become possible. It is simply no longer as difficult to hold up a structure. Steel can hold up virtually anything because it's so strong.

The steel girder presents an interesting problem to the architect. What do you do after 2000 years of domes, columns and flying buttresses? In those 2000 years there has been an encrustation of tradition, where big civic buildings incorporate of necessity "classical" forms and designs, and as a result, the civic idea is inextricably related in the mind to that classicism. A cathedral of the 15th Century looks like it does for both narrative and structural purposes. But what should a cathedral look like in the 20th Century, when even if the narrative purpose of expressing the infinite and the spiritual remains the same, we don't have the same problem of holding up the walls?

piece of art. We call this Found Art. And it fosters the idea that Art is what Artists call Art. It may also be pomo and not mod. Tough call.

⁵ And, like Duchamp's urinal, this is arguably pomo.

There are a number of answers to these and similar questions. The first big answer is the creation of the skyscraper, which can be seen as the apotheosis of the Modern Age. There is plenty of modern architecture, and modernist architecture, that is not tall. But if this is a time of migration to the cities, the idea of buildings reaching into the sky is emblematic of grasp of the city itself. New York engages itself in a continuing race to construct the tallest possible building, starting with the Woolworth Building and continuing up through the World Trade Center. If reaching for the sky is emblematic of a city's grasp, being the tallest building is a statement of a city's grasp on a global level.



The first Manhattan skyscrapers are, to our eyes, simply taller buildings, and the first wave culminates in the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building. Both constructed during the Depression, in virtually adjoining neighborhoods, they waged a literal race to see which would be the taller. In the end, the Empire State took the prize. Which was why the original King Kong had to climb it. Why would the world's biggest monster climb, say, the fifth highest building?

The designs of these early buildings is comparable. They are modernist in the art deco sense, full of streamlining to make them look, literally, "modern." Curiously, streamlining is a concept of movement. You streamline an object, like a car or an airplane, to reduce its resistance to motion through a stream of air. Since skyscrapers do not go anywhere, their streamlining is a statement of concept rather than a structural necessity. The 20s and 30s saw a lot of unnecessary streamlining: chairs, teapots, cocktail shakers. The classic martini glass may be the most modernist piece of glassware ever invented.

It is the glass box style that apotheosizes modernism in architecture. This style of building follows the elegant art deco structures of the 30s. After the Depression and WWII, the Seagram Building, the UN building, and finally the World Trade Center, mark the simplest form imaginable for their function. Glass boxes, as tall as you want them (as long as you leave room for elevators). The WTC makes the clearest, simplest statement possible. Here is the tallest building in the world (until the Sears tower replaced it), a monument to international capitalism, in a stripped-down elegant modern style devoid of (meaning-filled, contextual) decoration.

That's why they wanted to knock it down.

As we'll eventually see, it is often hard to differentiate between the modern and the postmodern in architecture. But it is not hard to understand what architects are trying to do. Take, for example, the Guggenheim museum in NYC.

The question is, what is the best way to look at an art exhibit? Presumably an art exhibit has a beginning, a middle and an end, a narrative imposed by the exhibit's curator. Our innate narrative sense brings the curator to set an exhibit up as a narrative, and the visitor to observe it as a narrative. You want to make order out of it, so that the visitors will understand the content of the exhibit. Now you could post a



lot of arrows in the building, originating with a Start Here and culminating in a This Way to the Egress (next to the gift shop). But that's the old way. Or, you could design your building with a beginning and a middle and the end.

That's exactly what Frank Lloyd Wright did with the Guggenheim Museum. It is a spiral, so it does indeed have a beginning and a middle and an end. Modern construction techniques allow it to be an inverted cone. And it's an absolutely perfect place to mount and visit an art exhibit.

The perfect meeting of form and function.

And a building no longer needs to be a box. It can be an inverted cone. Thanks to modern techniques, it doesn't fall down. And it is removed completely from all the pre-modern baggage of classical design and decoration.



Literature

If we're going to talk about narrative versus narration, books have to be the easiest way to do it. Which is why we've saved them for last.

A novel is by definition a narrative. So the idea of a non-narrative novel, of a non-narrative narrative, is an oxymoron.

A classic.

A book is made up of a variety of elements, just as a painting is made up of a variety of elements. Plot, characterization, use of language, Aristotelian dramatic thrust—all these are necessary to make a narrative work. The modernist looks at these elements, and redefines them, or eliminates them, or turns them on their head, just as did the abstract painter. We'll look at a few key examples.

James Joyce is a good start. He didn't write much, but he was about as avant garde as they get. In the beginning of his career he wrote the short stories of *The Dubliners*, featuring those famous



(to high school English students) epiphanies, where the characters become themselves in that internal moment of realization. Have you ever noticed that nothing much seems to happen in *The Dubliners*? If you're not paying attention, or you don't know what to look for, how do you know the story is over? Well, you turn the page and there's a new story.

Compare this to an O. Henry story, where there's clear action and the obvious movement of a resolution. There's a big difference. In all the arts, there's a big difference between the modernist and the non-modernist, the practitioner and the visionary, this school and that school. Don't get the idea from anything I'm writing that everybody was doing the same thing at the same time. Far from it. While Picasso was painting people with eyes on the same side of their head, Normal Rockwell was

painting heartwarming and realistic pictures of children playing hooky. Both had probably the same amount of fame and recognition and money in the bank.

It's a big world out there.

Getting back to Joyce, he worked through a steady line of abstraction over the years. He toys with stream of consciousness in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and presents it full blown in *Ulysses*. The latter is a fascinating experiment, a novel that takes place entirely in one day, based on the structure of Homer's *Odyssey*, filled with the stream of consciousness language of the modernist. By the time Joyce got to *Finnegans Wake*, which is the literary representation of a dream, he had given up on every piece of what we would consider normal narration. The book has no dramatic arc: it's written in a circle connecting the first and last pages. Joyce invented his own new allusive language. There is no story, no "characterization."

I have never met anyone who claims to have read this book in its entirety. And it's not just because of the dream structure. Compare *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It too is a dream, but in a classical novelistic structure. *Finnegan* is the way it is because that's the way Joyce wrote it.

A book you really can't read.

Like music you can't hear?

William Burroughs clipped together disparate pieces of text. This is reminiscent of the Surrealist game "the exquisite corpse," where multiple writers wrote phrases at random to form a story. The poet e. e. cummings stripped out all capital letters from his poetry, and used his own odd method of punctuation.

The end result of this sort of experimentation is narration without meaningful narrative (and often unreadable texts). All of this is bunched into the concept of avant garde, and these writers, as well as the abstract painters and atonal composers, very much identified themselves as avant gardists. My reading recommendation is *The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy* by Robert B Ray. It's a book of film criticism that discusses some of the main threads of modernist and postmodernist critique, and a good introduction to the area overall.

Is there a cause and effect in all of this? Well, artists are creative thinkers in whatever world/time/place they exist. Their work (at least traditionally) is meant to last, so their work gives us an idea of those worlds/times/places. What the modernists are telling to us from where they are is that they are somehow detached from the reality of their world enough to be able to comment on it, and that they are incorporating the new ideas of this world into their work to make that commentary. Henry Miller said that a true artist must understand science. The artists we're talking about, whatever the art form, incorporate the science of their times into their work. Eventually, today perhaps, the two are occasionally indistinguishable.

As you can see, there is certainly no straight line here. There are all sorts of things happening, and many of them, and the theories explaining them are contradictory. And as you move from the modern into the postmodern it gets even worse. There is a clear delineation between gothic and Romanesque styles of architecture, but if you look up modernist and postmodernist architecture, for instance, they will both claim certain buildings. So have no fear in venturing into these modernist/postmodernist waters. If you're studying a particular person, that's fine—find out what that person is saying. But overviews, including this one, are awfully reflective of some one person's subjective analysis, as compared to some objective truth.

Let me tell you what happened.
I will connect the random dots of my perceived reality.
But sometimes it's better if you connect the dots yourself.

One last note. Don't take any of this as being a total picture. Plenty of artists—good artists—were not modernists. Plenty of good artists disregarded modernism/abstraction or responded to it differently. No value judgment is implied that an artist who was not a modernist was not a thinking artist. The existence of the modern forces any artist to decide what to do about the modern in his or her own work. Acceptance or rejection of the modern is a personal choice, and for us to claim that one is better than the other is to believe that our ideas on something as ephemeral as what is good art, are somehow correct. We will never make that hubristic error of judgment.

So, to summarize the modern, it is narrative taken to its extremes in an examination of narration. Underlying all of it is still, in most cases, the individual voice of the artist. The work is individual expression, and deliberately so. But it is indeed at the extreme, and that extreme suggests limits. After you've been at the extreme edge, you either retreat or go beyond the edge.

You go to **post**modernism.

Part Five

Postmodernism

What we'll cover in this final section is a mishmash of ideas that can loosely be defined as postmodern. There are enough schools of thought with contrary ideas and opinions to in this area to fill shelf upon shelf of unreadable books. Which they do. Despite the fact that much of postmodern thought is related to linguistics, or language, it is surprising how many postmodern writers are incapable of expressing the simplest idea clearly. In fact, some postmodern writers set out to write unclearly, as part of their approach to their material. We will do our best to machete our way through this underbrush, trying to make things, if not academically perfect (I wouldn't want to submit any of this to a college pomo professor), then at least understandable. We will look at a handful of key ideas and try to find some good stuff you can take away and study further. Think of this as a starting point for exploration of modern thought.

As always, we need a reminder that every thinker of the late 20th century is not necessarily postmodern, just like every early 20th century artist is not necessarily a modernist. Quite the contrary. There is plenty of contemporary thought that owes nothing to modernism and postmodernism. The vast body of what you would call practical philosophers are in a different business altogether, and hold many of the ideas and concepts at the vanguard of critical theory (an offshoot of postmodernism) to be hokey of the first order. Plenty of philosophers believe enough in objective reality to find pomo claims of the lack of same to be pure nonsense. And the classic philosopher, trained in logic and at least the perceived goal of elucidating important ideas clearly, finds little to rejoice in with the gruesome writing of the pomos, many of whom do not even themselves make claims to be philosophers, or worse, make the claims but provide none of the training or depth or skills.

On the other hand, much of modern thought that has been adapted by the pomos is based on the best and truest science of the times, and is to some extent in tune with modern philosophy. Some of the things we'll discuss here are perfectly orthodox, and in fact do not at all fit under the category of postmodern. Our point is to find the key modern ideas and explore them. There is no test at the end of the lecture. We will look at semiotics, structuralism, deconstruction (a la Derrida), power (a la Foucault), simulation and simulacra (a la Baudrillard). We'll look at critical theory and some other random ideas. And once again we'll look at the expressions of these lines of thought in the arts.

The last thing I want to say at this point is this: Postmodernism is not a movement. Postmodernism isn't like rationalism, or empiricism, or utilitarianism, or any other specific line of thought. Postmodernism is totally undefined, except by individuals defining it for their own purposes. It is not a clear and simple movement you can point to. It means different things to different people.

Which means, we'd better begin by trying, however hard this may be, to pin it down a little.

Let's go back to our starting point. Let's go back to thinking about narrative.

Let me tell you what happened.

Here was the problem: Look back at modernism. Look back at all those divergent ideas that in one way or the other marked the separation of art from its narrative context. Look back at art becoming not about the narrative but about the narration, not about the subject but about the style. Paintings without brushstrokes. With the wrong colors. The wrong perspective. The wrong composition. Let me put it this way: For hundreds of years, if you wanted to understand art, you looked at how good the painting is against very specific and clear “rules,” if you want to call them that. How can you understand art in a world of modernism where all the rules are being called into question? And especially, how can you understand art in a world of modernism if you happen to be an art critic? Or music critic, or literary critic? Or even more important, an art academic, or music academic, or literary academic?

That’s a big question: when artists concentrate on the narration rather than the narrative, or extreme self-expression, what do critics and academics concentrate on?

The answer is simple. The critics concentrate on HOW the artists narrated rather than WHAT the artists narrated. As a result of modernism, the movement in criticism and academia starts to comment entirely on the narration rather than the content of narrative.

Eventually, this becomes true of reading both contemporary and pre-contemporary texts. As the critics develop a set of tools to understand pure narration, they start adapting these tools to any narrative they can find. If we read Dickens we no longer wonder about the living conditions of the poor, we wonder if Dickens was a male chauvinist pig who beat both his wife and his mistress, and we try to find this out through our reading of his books with new critical tools developed for that purpose.

And that is one very real basis of pomo: How can critics respond to modernism?

In the same way artists tried to find new ideas in the modern, critics tried to find new ideas to explain the modern, and those ideas became known as postmodernism. Additionally, the artists themselves were forced to address the existence of the modern, and those who did so directly created postmodern works contemporaneously with the critics developing postmodernist analysis. So you have critics and academics and artists all responding to modernism, which itself came in a million different flavors.

Is there any wonder that there are so many different ideas about what pomo is?

Pomo is most popular in academia, although there is some suggestion (hope?) that its popularity is diminishing, that some of the ideas we’re going to be discussing may, in fact, be passé. So, apply it to the real world at your own risk. But, be that as it may, some of the ideas are absolutely fascinating, so fascinating that you WANT to apply them to everything in the real world. And in one or two cases, that’s not a bad idea at all.

As we start, we can isolate one very key idea that will define the postmodern for us. In the classical, it was about the narrative. In the modern, it was about the narration. In the postmodern, it is about the narrator. “Let me tell you what happened.”

Me? Let *me* tell you what happened? But who are *you* to tell *me* what happened? You don’t own the narrative. Even if you’re the author of a work of fiction, you do not own the interpretation. Anyone can interpret the text. No interpretation is better than any other interpretation. Because language is a slippery construct with no underlying reality, because your truth is no better than my truth in a relativistic universe, all the words can do, or all the text can do, is make references to other words or other texts.

In the postmodern, the narrator is removed from the equation. What matters is the reading of the text, the interpretation. We are all the interpreters. And no interpretation is better than any other interpretation. An assertion that it is your narrative, that you are the author, is an assertion that you hold power over me as your reader, or that the narrative contains truth. This assertion of power is an evil thing, used only to make that false claim of truth. The more you assert power—the more you try to inflict your narration, or your interpretation of the narrative, on others—the worse you are. If you are the State, then, providing a narrative of history or culture, you are in the position to exercise the most power and be the most evil by inflicting your narrative on the most people: the masses.

The postmodernist reading of this lecture is that I am inflicting my reading of the text of history on my students. This is a straightforward abuse of power. The students should make their own individual readings of the text. A postmodern analysis can point out my abuses of women, minorities, age groups, the French, the *philosophes*, Plato, you name it. The minute I begin, “Let me tell you what happened,” I have committed a political action. At that minute, you respond by telling me your own interpretation of what happened, knowing that both our interpretations will be of necessity wrong, since they are simply individual interpretations.

And, surprisingly enough, there is some reasonable basis for this nonsensical hooey.

Let me tell you what happened.

Shut up and listen.

(And, oh yeah, there are still plenty of artists of all stripes who are interested in content and narrative and have no truck with postmodern analysis. Keep in mind that we are analyzing postmodernism here, not contemporary art as a whole. Pomo is merely one slice, or perhaps one way of looking at things, and a way that many do not agree with. Keep that in the back of your mind as we make broad general statements, that we are making them as pomo scholars, not as objective analysts.)

Semiotics

Let's start with Semiotics, because there's some remarkable truth in it. And to begin, let's look at an example.

I'm surfing the TV remote. I click to a dog show, and see in the first instant a dog I've never seen before. First of all, I know immediately it is a dog; this is because I recognize the signs of its dogness (shape, the way its being handled, the way it walks, hairiness, size). My brain reacts to the sight of what's on the TV and immediately concludes: dog. This is true even of little children, who would also look at the new dog and also instantly recognize it as a dog, even though they have never seen that particular breed of dog before; it's not hard to recognize the signs of dogness, even for a preschooler.

But each of us brings more to it than that, more than the mere knowledge that the object before us is a dog. When we look at a dog, our brains perform a series of calculations, collating all our previous dog experiences. Our brains fire on our personal history with dogs, as much as we know of the natural history of jackals and coyotes, our memories of the Beethoven and Benji movies, Odie from Garfield, the history of the Westminster Dog Show, a million different elements, everything that is connected in our minds to the idea of "dog."

Remember one of our original assertions, that humans have an instinct to narrative. We are hardwired to make stories out of things, to connect things. Charles Peirce was a philosopher whose work on the concept of signs provides a basis for the study known as semiotics, and semiotics is, essentially, an attempt to understand *how* humans make those narrative connections that we've been maintaining are instinctual.

Peirce was an American who may be the easiest to read on this subject; he doesn't write with a lot of obfuscating language. According to Peirce⁶ we think only in signs. Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. "Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign." Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as "signifying" something, that is, referring to or standing for something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of semiotics.

The other seminal semiotician (there's a phrase for you) is the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure defined a sign as being composed of a "signifier" (*signifiant*), the form which the sign takes, and the "signified" (*signifié*), the concept it represents. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as "signification," and the "sign" is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified.

And this is where this material begins getting difficult, not so much in the concepts but in the way the concepts are explained. What is being said here is that you see (or hear or smell) something, and that connects to a preexisting idea or set of ideas you already have. One thing signifies something else. The first thing, the one that signifies, is neutral, devoid of meaning. What it signifies is what gives it its meaning. The use of variants of the word sign (in English or French) make for our confusion, and these guys aren't even trying to be confusing.

As a linguistic example of a sign, the word "open," when it is invested with meaning by someone who encounters it on a shop doorway, is a sign consisting of a signifier (the word

⁶ I'm relying mostly on my own research throughout this essay, but in the semiotics material I've taken some analysis from a professor named Daniel Chandler.

“open”) and a signified concept, that the shop is open for business. The same signifier (the word “open”) could stand for a different signified (and thus be a different sign) if it were on a push-button inside an elevator (“push to open door”). Similarly, many signifiers could stand for the concept “open” (for instance, on top of a packing carton, a small outline of a box with an open flap for “open this end”), with each unique pairing constituting a different sign.

Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic “sign systems,” such as a medium or genre. They study how meanings are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of texts (although it is far more than just a mode of textual analysis), in the way we have been defining texts, i.e., any narrative. A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication.

The thing to know is that semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. One neutral thing refers to other meaningful things. Our brains collect indicators/references/whatever—those unconnected dots of perceived reality. When we encounter a signifier, we are provided with a way of connecting some of those dots. The semiotician would put it another way: Our understanding of reality is our reading of the signs. In the semiotic model, we can analyze a thought (or an object) by evaluating what it signifies. The mind works by connecting signifiers. (And a corollary of this is that I can see how someone else’s mind works by reading their signs.)

So what is the point of all of this? It has to be more than just seeing an Open sign on a door and figuring out that the shop is open. And it is.

First, it sets up a system for understanding how the mind works. The mind, according to this line of philosophical reasoning, works by identifying signs.

Second, it allows us to evaluate the workings of a given mind. We can see how someone connects the signs, or connects the dots, and read that text of their connections. We can do this because we theoretically understand how the narration (in this case, thinking) works.

And third, I can take signs and study them as signs. Why is such and such a sign, and what does it mean/signify? This leads to a lot of interesting areas of study in and of themselves because some signs are invested with so much signification. Coke is not merely a sign of a beverage; it is the original signifier of American commercial globalization. Disney is a favorite subject of a lot of modern thinkers, and Disney certainly has incredible semiotic fascination. Not only is Disney a company represented by a mouse (globalization, disneyfication as in applying the Disney theme park planning model to the real world, commercialization of art), but it has a long history of creating versions of archetypal narratives that rework the original meanings (compare Disney’s Snow White to the Grimms’ Snow White, for example).

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign... Uncle Ben. The Cleveland Indians. Reader’s Digest. McDonalds.

And the interesting thing is, to a degree, the semioticians are correct when they talk about connecting the little signifying dots. This is exactly how the mind works according to the latest understandings.

Thinking is a process very much as the semioticians describe it. Our minds are loose collections of data (the dots). Thinking is the action of “agents” connecting those data/dots. The

resulting thought is the connection of signifieds. In other words, the mind is a narrative-processing (narrative-creating) machine!

Which I've been saying all along.⁷

Let me amplify what I just said: we're starting to see real scientific work proving philosophical constructs. There is even a word for this—consilience, coined by E. O. Wilson. This refers to a coming together of the hard and soft sciences. At some point, the way the brain works physiologically should connect to philosophy and psychology, if any of these disciplines are going to make a pretense of being truth. And it's happening. It's not just highfalutin theory any more (as in Freud, for instance, who made his stuff up with no basis in science). Today we control thoughts with drugs, and we believe that emotions evolve, and we've thrown out the model of the blank slate. And the mind works roughly the way the semioticians say it works.

There's another word for all this sign/signified/signification business, by the way. That word is metaphor. We don't know anything for real. All we know is metaphors for reality (signs/thoughts/call it what you will). The word metaphor will pop up repeatedly in postmodern analysis.

Just as a sidenote that might help you understand this material, think about names.

Here comes Joe. You see him, and your mind does a bit of connecting—the face, the memories you have of Joe, etc—and, yessiree bob, it's Joe. So, you say, "Hi, Joe." But that fact that he is Joe is entirely arbitrary. He is not inherently Joe. There is not an objective reality in your brain that makes him a Joe instead of a John. If he were named John, and everything else were the same—the face, the memories you have of him, etc—he would be exactly the same person with a different name. The name is meaningless: it is the associations inside your head that matter.

By the same token, and starting with my first example, we call a dog a dog not because it is a dog, but because we have arbitrarily come up with the collection of the letters D and O and G to refer to a certain kind of animals with certain characteristics. And in hypothetical cultures where there are no dogs, there is no empty slot in the language for the word for dog: languages

⁷ Just for the hell of it, look at these three models of how the mind works. I just picked this up whole from EB.

The Computational Theory of Mind solves the philosophical conundrum of how mental events (e.g., beliefs and desires) march in step with and cause physical events (e.g., my avoiding a speeding car) despite there already being a complete physical causation for the latter. It postulates that, like computers, the mind is a manipulator of physical symbols, which have both representational, i.e., standing for particular entities in the outside world, and causal properties. The symbols are acted on by the machinery of the mind in a way that is blind to its semantics, but sensitive to its syntax (or structural form). The crux of this theory is that the syntactic manipulations of a symbol respect its semantics in a truth-preserving fashion.

The Modularity of Mind states that the mind is not a single organ but a system of largely independent functional organs analogous to the organs in the body. Thus the mind is not a single general purpose intelligence, but a collection of competences each specialized for one function (e.g., stereoscopic vision). The modules are not discrete anatomical boxes, nor are they tightly sealed off from one another, communicating only through a few narrow pipelines. They are defined by the special things they do with the information available to them. The modules solve problems that are 'ill-posed', they literally have no solution, by making assumptions about the nature of the world.

Lastly Evolutionary Psychology explains the mind as a complex adaptive design in terms of Natural Selection, specifically that the mind was designed to solve the everyday problems our foraging ancestors faced. Using Evolutionary Psychology we can reverse engineer the mind - once we know what forces shaped a system we can begin to understand its components.

do not work on trans-literal equivalencies. There isn't a slot representing every reality simply waiting for someone to assemble some letters to fill up the slot with a name.

Although names are absolutely arbitrary, they are occasionally tinged with meaning. So if I name my child Adolph, there is a hint of Hitler about that that is difficult to shake when we hear that name. If I name him Banana we get confused because that name is already taken up by yellow fruits. And of course names can be formed from root concepts; e.g., an automobile is a self-moving machine, and we can tell that from the roots of the words, but the words auto and mobile are arbitrary, and until we know the meaning of those words, we wouldn't know that the word automobile is actually descriptive.

The easiest way to see how names are meaningless and arbitrary is to look at how often within families, where people are the most likely to know your name, you are often called by someone else's name. It's not that your mother confuses you with your father and calls you by his name because she can't tell the difference between you, it's simply that the names have no intrinsic reality of their own, so the brain doesn't necessarily worry about them. And if you know enough people, sooner or later you'll start forgetting their names, even though you can remember almost everything else about them. That you saw them in a debate round and they ran an interesting take on deontology is memorable because it's meaningful; the name, on the other hand, escapes me.

So the names are like signs, and it is what they signify that matters, and not the names themselves.

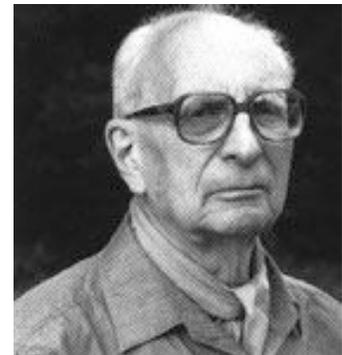
Structuralism

We'll move on from semiotics to the next big 20th century idea that interests us: Structuralism.

You hear the word structuralism a lot in modern thought, and it is very much what we've been talking about in this essay. We've been contemplating the idea of no longer studying the content of a narrative, whatever it is, but studying the nature of the narration. Now here's a definition I picked up somewhere: "In structuralism, the individuality of the text disappears in favor of looking at patterns, systems, and structures. Some structuralists propose that ALL narratives can be charted as variations on certain basic universal narrative patterns." In other words, structuralism is the study of process rather than content—the study of narration rather than narrative.

In a nutshell: the nice thing about structuralism is that the word means exactly what you think it means, the search for and study of underlying structures.

Claude Levy-Strauss is the Daddy of all Structuralism. An anthropologist who studied cultures, Levi-Strauss claimed that radically different cultures were structurally identical, that in fact there was such a thing as a structure of culture, and all individual cultures were merely individual expressions of that structure. In our terms, the narratives of the French and the Ooga-Boogas may be different but their cultures boil down to the same elements comprising the same structures. From the scientific point of view, the structuralist says: Find the comparable elements that comprise the structures, and you will understand what makes a culture, what a culture boils down to, what all cultures have in common even though they look different. From that point, you study not the French or the Ooga-Boogas, you study structure itself. And then, ultimately, you will understand culture qua culture, what makes a culture in the first place. From that point, you can understand a specific culture because you understand how it relates individually to the general structure of culture.



The structuralist, therefore, looks for the underlying patterns, for commonalities. You can apply structuralism to virtually anything, and that open application underlies some of the most important thinking of the modern age. Structuralism in literature. Structuralism in psychology. Structuralism in philosophy. You name the discipline, there's a structuralist approach to it.

A simplistic structuralist approach to debate would study not the narratives of debate (the cases) but the underlying structure, same as anything else, That is, the structuralist would study the forms of the opposing sides (what is an aff or neg always trying to do) rather than their arguments themselves on a given topic (what is *this* aff or neg trying to do). No question about it, this is narration versus narrative. Or, the structuralist can look at the topic, and evaluate the structures relevant to the subject rather than the narrative (the individual arguments in a given round) of each side.

What we would commonly call a critique/kritik is, in fact, a structuralist analysis of debate or of a resolution.

Anyhow, structuralism is one of the biggest intellectual deals of the modern age. The end result of structuralism is the realization of similarities in disparate situations (the French aren't all that different from the Ooga-Boogas), and the recognition of narration as a unique object of study, separate from narrative.

(For another take on this material, see the addenda to this lecture.)

Deconstruction

The next big idea we're going to look at is deconstruction, the most misunderstood, misused word in contemporary dialogue.

Deconstruction is primarily associated with the French thinker Jacques Derrida. Note that I do not call him a philosopher. (Those who subscribe to his theories *do* call him a philosopher.) I'm agnostic about the depth of JD. There may or may not be a philosophical construct underlying deconstruction as it relates to Derrida. For that matter, there may or may not be truth underlying deconstruction as it relates to Derrida. I don't know. The reason I don't know is that Jacques D is the epitome of the unreadable writer. Is he dense because he's deep or because he's confused? Is his narration confused because he believes that narration cannot be anything but confused, or is he just a confusing writer? Depends on your point of view. You love him or you hate him, and you love or hate his writing depending on that starting point. Everything that I understand about



him I have gotten through secondary resources. If you can read him and make sense of him, be my guest. He's all yours.

Anyhow, the principle of deconstruction goes like this (quoted from a true believer):
“The guiding insight of deconstruction is that every structure—be it literary, psychological, social, economic, political or religious—that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out. These exclusive structures can become repressive—and that repression comes with consequences.... Derrida insists that what is repressed does not disappear but always returns to unsettle every construction, no matter how secure it seems. Mr. Derrida understood all too well the danger of beliefs and ideologies that divide the world into diametrical opposites: right or left, red or blue, good or evil, for us or against us. He showed how these repressive structures, which grew directly out of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition, threatened to return with devastating consequences.”

That's a pretty clear explanation. Societal structures have inherent exclusions. (Structure here is not meant in the “structuralism” sense of the word, necessarily, simply in the idea of the things that make up society). For instance, women are excluded from modern government structures based on Locke, because women were excluded from 18th Century politics. That exclusion can lead to (or be) repression, e.g., women not voting. And that repression can have bad effects today, as in, even though women are theoretically equal, in fact they are still second-class citizens socially, economically, politically, whatever. The issue is, it may be hard to see how women are second-class citizens, since legally that's not supposed to be true. The deconstructionist can point out how.

So if you take this a few steps further, it's not what you say that matters, but what you don't say. It's not the text/narrative that's the problem, it's what underlies the text/narrative. The process of

exclusion is structural (inherent). What you don't say represses/excludes something important. And that exclusion leads to problems.

So is this philosophy? Sociology? Politics? Frenchiness? Take your pick. One thing, though, it's extremely popular in academic circles, especially in the subject of literature. A literary example of deconstruction could be, say, Dickens. We analyze what Dickens *doesn't* say about women to understand the antifeminist subtexts of Victorian England. Not that Dickens's works aren't filled with women, except that his women are usually his least interesting or memorable (or, for that matter, well-drawn) characters. But their blandness or forgetability is indicative of a subtext of exclusion of women (or, perhaps, exploitation of women, or hatred of women). What do *Copperfield's* two wives tell us about women in the 19th century? We deconstruct the text, evaluating the child bride versus the practical adult woman, and since neither of these is a real individual, we attempt to extrapolate the situation of real individuals from these fictional constructs.

Deconstruction is often done for political ends (to understand or expose the repression of groups), and therein is the problem for deciding if decon is "right." Should every text be reread against what it doesn't say? Is there a hidden subtext to everything? Is this a good way to go about changing the world? Let's say that we set out to prove that there is antifeminism in Dickens. So what? It doesn't solve anything. That's not so bad when you're talking about Dickens and literary criticism, but if you approach politics as a deconstructionist, the question is, then what? You go about pointing out that some group or other is excluded, but the deconstructionist offers no solution.⁸

And what if you deconstruct debate resolutions? Point out all the exclusions? The inherent flaws? Well, you're a Frenchman sitting in a cafe with a *filtre*, a *Galouise* and a chip on your shoulder. You're not changing the world, you're merely complaining that the world sucks, and showing us how it sucks. *Comme ca*. Thanks a lot. The lack of an ethical construct to solve for the problems delineated by the deconstructionists (kritikers?) is why so many people find them jejune.

As far as literature is concerned, critics of deconstruction and its cousins like critical theory (about which more later) claim that this approach to literature has made much academia into a joke. Newspapers reprint the list of topics at the annual Modern Language Association meetings to hold them up to ridicule, especially when the academics are venturing into popular culture. It's one thing to search for anti-Black exclusionism in 19th Century jurisprudence, for instance, and another thing altogether to look for it in *Bugs Bunny*. But people do. And then they write like Derrida, in sentences no one can read. Academia becomes a joke. Which is another kick against this approach in debate. Most high school teachers are concerned with narratives qua narratives, what writers said, not what they didn't say. It's hard enough to teach literature to 15-year-olds without having to battle rabbits that are both wascally and wascist. Teachers can be touchy about students dabbling in an arena in which the teachers are made out to be idiots. Can't say as I blame them.

⁸ And as some would say, e.g. Camille Paglia, this approach to art is false and misses the point of literature. When that is all you're learning in a literature class, I concur.

In the real world, deconstruction has come to mean an awful lot of things other than what is meant in the Derrida sense. But when used in the Derrida sense, it can be a core of political activism. Deconstruct the State of the Union speech, for example. In the Derrida sense, you'd evaluate how it points up the exclusions of modern America and refer to what wasn't referred to, and make a call to arms out of it. A call to arms to do *what*, however, is what deconstruction doesn't offer.

And the other big Derridean thing we'll come back to is the oppositions, the clash of opposites. The excluded group being somehow the opposite of the included group. As I say, more on that later.

Anyhow, so far we've seen signs versus signifier (we see a sign of a dog to get the idea of a dog), narrative versus narration (we study structures to understand content/narratives), and now you need to remember text and subtext (in deconstruction you study the subtext to find what the text is hiding). Which brings up an interesting point. The word **text** is big in pomoland. And there's three major pieces of it. The **text** is the narrative, the thing at hand. The **subtext** is what's behind or under the narrative, the stuff the narrative doesn't say. And finally the **context** is where this text, this narrative, exists in relation to other texts or narratives. (Contexts are much clearer to see than subtexts. The context of, say, Joyce's *Ulysses* includes father/son narratives going back to the Greeks, the Odyssey, Irish literature, Irish life, stream-of-consciousness experimentation, etc.—all real ideas that you can get your mind around. In the olden days, you might say, academics relied heavily on context to understand texts; today they rely on subtexts.)

Text. Context. Subtext. Pomos love nothing more than throwing around words that you used to think meant one thing and now mean something else altogether. Get used to it.

Foucault

The appeal of Michel Foucault to debate, not only LD but Policy, is that he talks about power. And certainly the nature of power—and who possesses it and who doesn't—is an issue in both areas of forensics. What Foucault says has a strong ring of truth to it: he is not your everyday French crackpot. What Foucault says is also very simple and very obvious, when you think about it. And it ties in directly to things like deconstruction. If deconstruction is the search for subtexts indicating who is excluded from the texts, it isn't a long leap to decide that those excluded folks are, one way or another, the powerless.

To begin with, there is a very simple underlying starting thesis to Foucault's work: to wit, Knowledge is Power. Sure, it's a cliché, but in Foucault's hands, it's quite meaningful, especially when you remember that his first work in this area was in the field of mental illness. Let's look at the specifics.

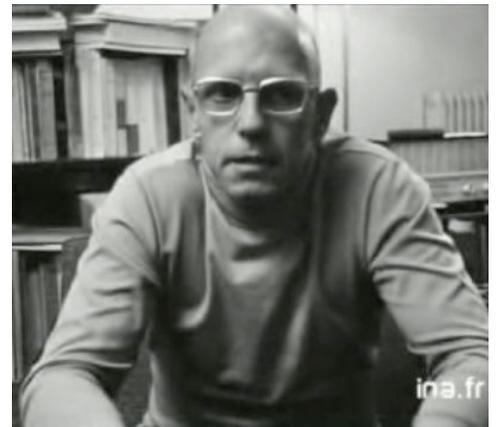
According to Foucault, there are a handful of people who have special knowledge about something. This special knowledge provides a source power for them. And this power, derived from knowledge, allows them to define what is normal and what is not.

As I said, the first big area for Foucault was mental illness—madness (later he wrote about sex). According to Foucault, it is the doctors, with the power stemming from their knowledge, who decide who is mad and who is normal. The people in asylums are not there because there is some objective measure of sanity and madness. The people in asylums are there because someone (in power) said these people do not conform to a norm (established by the knowledge of the powerful). Since there is no objective normal, the normative is merely a construct, and it's the powerful who determine the construct. It's the powerful who decide who is mad and who isn't. It's the powerful who decide what is normal and what isn't.

(It's an easy step to see how this can also be applied to sex. Foucault was gay, and lived most of his life during a period when being gay was generally considered a perversion. The powerful decided that being gay was not the norm, in other words.)

And here's where you start forgetting about the knowledge side of the equation. Normal is what the powerful decide is normal. You can see where this leads. The powerful determine right and wrong in a subjective universe, because the powerful have the power to enforce punishments for doing wrong and rewards for doing right. (That bit about punishment and rewards is pure Foucault.) Might makes right in the purest moral sense, and you don't necessarily need knowledge to be mighty...

According to this analysis, the normative is what the powerful say it is, not the mean of what everyone does on some sort of objective continuum, which is how you would usually understand the concept of normative/normal. There's no objective right or wrong, there's only conforming to the normative as laid down by the powerful (who may or may not have achieved their power through knowledge). Running Foucault, therefore, applies a comparable equation to a debate topic.



One down side of running Foucault is actually finding where he says any of the stuff that I've just cited. If you read *Madness and Civilization*, for instance, you'll learn about the history of mental illness, and leprosy—originally the so-called mentally ill stayed with the family until leprosy was cured, and the resulting emptying of the leprosy asylums opened up space so they became mental asylums where we could now hide away our crazy people—and about the transference between a patient and a psychiatrist, but you'd have to be quite the hound to derive what I've said about power and the normatives. He is as much a historian as any sort of philosopher, if you ask me. In any case, at least he is readable. If you plan to run him, then read him. You have no excuse not to.

Baudrillard

Finally, because he connects back to a lot of what we've been talking about, which is the arts, there is Jean Baudrillard. Yeah, another Frenchman. The best place to start with Baudrillard is *Simulacra and Simulation*, a book you can actually read and understand. (It's the book where Neo hides his computer disk in *The Matrix*).

Baudrillard talks specifically about art in the postmodern world. A **simulation** is a representation of reality. For example, the France attraction in Epcot is a simulation. (Baudrillard loves talking about Disney.) The exhibit, with its versions of real French icons like the Eiffel Tower, is an attempt to recreate France, or maybe more to the point, the essence of an idealized France. (The Paris hotel in Las Vegas does the same thing in very much the same way; as a whole, Vegas is nothing more than another version of Disney, according to this line of thinking.)



But according to Baudrillard, art and reality are moving closer together in the modern world. And when the border between art and reality disappears, you get a simulacrum: “The distinction between the signs and what they refer to breaks down.” For example, Main Street, in the Magic Kingdom, is a **simulacrum**, defined the recreation of something that never existed.

The recreation of something that never existed?

In this case, it's the recreation of the idealized *image* of a small town. This particular small town never actually existed; we just like to think that it did.

The next step from here is Baudrillard's point, that the simulations and simulacra of influential places like Disneyland have run over into everyday life, to the point that we are living in houses and towns that are not real anymore. We are simulating real life. And, probably, we don't even know what real life is anymore.

These are the ideas that Baudrillard kicks around: Theming, the meaning of McDonalds, the meaning of “America” in very large quotes. To me, the essence of cultural studies starts with JB, so if you're interested in the meaning of these things, he's a good place to start.

I have done a lecture on the Old Baudleroo and *Simulacra and Simulation*, available separately on my podcast page. Since then, I've also tracked down his thoughts on art, one of which may be the best intro to his thinking. In *The Conspiracy of Art* Baudrillard talks about (among other things) how the Duchamps readymades (to wit, the toilet he installed in a museum, named “Fountain” and signed R. Mutt) redefined art. At the point where *anything* could be a piece of art (because the artist said so), the boundary between art and reality disappears. Any work can be a work of art, even a common manufacture. Baudrillard brackets this with Andy Warhol's soup cans. Here, an ordinary commodity, the can of soup, becomes the subject of a traditional work of art, a painting. So art completely becomes commodity, commodities completely become art, commodification supplants artistic creation, etc. (The whole commodification thing—e.g., the buying of the Disney souvenir—plays large in Baudrillard's analyses.) The key thing here is that this elimination of the line between reality and unreality, or art and reality, or whatever you want to call it, comes up a lot in Baudrillard's work. The “fountain” as art is a good way to understand this.

Critical Theory

There is much writing about specific political and historical subjects done in something we've referred to along the way: critical theory. Sometimes this is just referred to as theory. In either case, CT is the application of the ideas of postmodernism to specific problems.

A prime (and seminal) example of CT is critical legal studies. The background of critical legal studies commences with the Reagan Administration: "As more and more Republicans were tapped during this Republican era, most of the Federal judges appointed were conservative, leaving many more liberal colleagues behind them teaching in the law schools. Those liberal legal scholars believe that the system of law reflects the privileged subjectivity of those in power and that the system of law cannot be unbiased." These liberal academics (and I hate the association of liberal politics with CT but the connection is, alas, real) formed critical legal studies. In other words, they were saying that the system of law is inherently flawed and biased. And you can clearly see the influences of structuralism, Foucault, and Derrida in this "critical" analysis.

CLS people emphasized class and economic structure in their analyses. One major spin-off was Critical race theory. CRT insists that race is more critical to social structure than class/economics. Critical race theorists consider race up front and personal. They use narrative to provide the stories that bring some understanding of the unstated assumptions of privilege. They want more than the theorist's contemplation of doctrine and principles. They want change. And they want it now. (Unfortunately, I'm not sure how they expect to get it, the fundamental problem of Foucaultian analysis.)

You can approach CT from a variety of angles. Another obvious big one—feminism. There's plenty of orthodox CT feminist doctrinists out there, and they are often used in debate.

So here's what you ask yourself if you want to apply critical analysis: Where do you see the problem? In the individual? In the social structure? And where do you see the solution? In the individual? In the social structure? The CTer says the social structure. For example, look at teenage crime: If we believe that by providing security, basic needs, a family environment, and support for adolescents, they will not fall into delinquency, that is a structural approach. But if we believe that if we teach morals and strength of integrity to our young people, they will not fall into delinquency, that is an individual approach. We will find different policy approaches depending on the different theoretical perceptions of the social problem and the way it can be expressed as a function of tension between the individual and the social structure.

The Feminist approach to addressing social problems in CT is comparable. One often thinks of the radical feminist as one who views social problems structurally: The power structure excludes women, so we need to change the power structure. But to the extent that one believes that it is the individual woman who has "false consciousness" and must be made to see the falsity of her position, then both the problem and the solution to some extent are in the individual herself. That is, the social structure is out to get you, and worse, you've bought into it (a key feminist doctrine that seeks to explain why so many women aren't feminists). You can see here the metanarrative dictating individual narrative.

This whole CT discussion is based on a sort of Foucault model, the people in power create the normative, mixed with deconstruction, try to find the group that is excluded.

There is no “normal,” there’s only what the powerful claim is normal. Feel free to apply it to religion, democracy, etc. Find some disempowered group, claim that they’re excluded by the normative of the powerful, and you’ve got a case.

The next step in this line of logic, by the way, is to assert that there is no reality, only what the powerful say is real.

Which is, if you’ve ever been to the movies, the Matrix, which for some people is the absolute definition of relativistic postmodern deindividualization.

Language (a last look)

The concept of language carries a lot of weight in modern thought, and much of the good contemporary work in understanding how the mind functions is done in the scientific discipline of linguistics. Linguistics covers a lot of areas: what is language, how does language work, how do people use language. Obviously language is a crucial construct of being human, and there is good reason to believe that humans are hardwired for language. That is, language is not simply something we have developed, like screwdrivers, useful but separate from the nature of our existence. Rather, language is thought to be inextricably linked to that nature of our existence. It is thought to be, not a learnt thing, but an instinct. It may not be that we speak because as culturally trained individuals we learn how to speak, but because as animals we inherit an instinct to speak, the same way birds inherit an instinct to migrate south for the winter. They don't consciously think about it, they just do it. We don't consciously decide to communicate through language, we just do it.⁹

(And there are many curious aspects to this. The language instinct is separate even from the ability to speak or hear; the rules that linguists have determined comprise a language are inherent even to deaf signing: sign language, with no design or intention, conforms to all the rules of spoken language, even among those born deaf. That is, the way we learn to speak and hear if we can do so are almost identically emulated through signing and seeing by those who can't. And if you believe that language is a container for culture, as many do, it is easy to understand why signers believe that their language is in fact the artifact of a unique culture, and not simply a mechanism to overcome an inability. There is much fascinating material to be gotten from linguists; read Stephen Pinker—*The Language Instinct* and *How the Mind Works*.)

Language may be one of the most interesting things about us as human animals. And one of the most important. It is certainly reflective of our thought process, of the way we think. It can even be seen as the actual mechanism of the thought process. That is, language doesn't simply reflect our thoughts, language actually is our thoughts. Which would mean that language is not merely part of being human, but is the determinant of being human. Language is not communication but existence. I think, therefore I am. I am the sum of my thoughts.

Whether or not you accept this as true physiologically, it is accepted as true metaphorically for many modern thinkers. Which is why language and the study of language play prominent and seminal roles in postmodern thinking. Without going into great depth on this, this is the schematic:

1. A human being experiences sense perceptions
2. That sensory information registers in the brain
3. The brain processes that sensory information
4. The end result for the human being is thought

The key thing to understand is that the thought is not the reality; the thought is the brain's computation based on reality (assuming the sensory perception is a measure of reality in the first place). The process of that computation is semiotic, performed in the medium of language. What the brain ends up with is a perception of reality, rather than reality itself, or in the words of postmodernism, the brain creates a metaphor for the reality. The metaphors add up to a narrative, and the individual's narrative is the sum of his metaphors.

Simple enough.

(Simple?)

⁹ The Wild Child subject in *City of Glass* addresses this material.

What I'm doing here is throwing out some terminology. We've touched on this already, in semiotics. The underlying ideas are simple enough, but they carry heavy baggage of jargon. What you need to do is know what the buzzwords are, to recognize them and the concepts they refer to. I am also pointing out why language is so important in modern critical analysis. If language is the medium of thought, inextricable from thought, indeed the *process* of thought, a human instinct that *defines* humanity, then language must be pretty goddamn important. And therefore words, which are the materials of language, must be pretty goddamn important too. And usage, which is the process of language (the manipulation of words), must be pretty goddamn important too.

There are many ways to analyze words and their power. A racial epithet, for instance, has very straightforward power, derived from the simple history of the epithet, that can easily be analyzed outside of critical theory. If you stereotype someone, you are ignoring that person's individuality. So it's not as if critical theory has a monopoly on language study, but merely that critical theory is one way to approach language study. (And, do note, that while I am seemingly beginning to use the phrase critical theory sort of interchangeably with postmodernism, I'm really not. They are not exactly interchangeable, at least not in all instances. Critical theory is a reasonable way to refer to the ideas of modern critical thought derived from postmodernist sources; postmodernism is a reasonable way to refer to ideas that are contextually derived from or juxtaposed against modernism. If you are actually a postmodernist or CTer yourself, you will probably take exception to my loosey-gooseyness on this, but then again, you're part of the problem, not part of the solution.)

So now let's take a critical theory look of the power of words. We start with euphemisms.

A euphemism is the substitution of an agreeable or neutral term for an offensive one. The Victorians, those sexy devils, were loath to use the words leg or breast. Hence the expressions light meat and dark meat. You most certainly can think of various innocent phrases used to describe bodily functions; we may train our children at a young age that they've got to go potty, for instance. Or try this one: "How'd you make out?" "I got to second base." (And what exactly is second base, anyhow? "That boy really knows how to make things happen out there.") She was a soiled dove, a lady of the evening.

You get the picture. Sexual terms are euphemized to allow us to discuss sex in polite society. Unpleasant terms are euphemized so that we can announce that we have to go to the bathroom without anyone being embarrassed by the (rather natural) idea. And I'll bet you can come up with ten expressions for vomit in less time that it takes you to pray to the god of porcelain.

Euphemism provides socially acceptable substitutes for socially unacceptable words and phrases. I'd rather be a sanitation engineer than a garbage man. Even at the simplest substitutional level, I'd rather be a custodian than a janitor.

Once we get into euphemism, the next step is what has been called political correctness (a term loaded itself with negative connotations). We have Native-Americans, we have African-Americans. We talk not about "slaves" but enslaved people. Why? What makes these better, more correct, than other expressions? It's still the same people, after all.

The point of these particular coinages is that they are not binary. We've talked about opposites, and the assumption that one is good and the other isn't. Western/Oriental for instance.

How about white and black? Same thing. Once you divide the world into two camps, the theory is that you pretty quickly decide that one camp is better than the other. If you're a Black person, then you're not a White person. Black implies White through its opposition/apposition. But what's the opposite of African-American? What's the opposite of Italian-American? Native American? These phraseologies attempt to remove the binary, opposition aspect from the language. Yes, they try to be "correct" for political reasons, but at a subconscious level they do indeed come across as neutral insofar as they have no opposite, and certainly no preferable opposite. They bestow a level of linguistic respect. And sure, it can go too far, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. Gay/straight, black/white, male/female. According to the theory, the language entails exclusion and ultimately demonization. If you think about it, this is merely a spin on the old referring to people as stereotypes argument. So it's not new. And it's not terrible, either.

Words do have true power, and we've talked about that in the context of various resolutions over the years. (Hate speech is a perfect example.) Words shape ideas and ideas shape words. Look at historical fact: start with the 9/11 attacks. This led to "the Patriot Act." The Patriot Act contains various rights restrictions that would have previously been unthinkable; now, because of its very name, if you don't agree with it, it's not that you're somehow defending human rights, you're unpatriotic. The President defined "the war on terror." Subsequently, no matter what he does at the international level, it's the war on terror, including the attack on Iraq. Don't agree with the President's policies? Then you must be in favor of terrorism. And who's the enemy? "The axis of evil." We don't define or explain the enemy, we demonize them.

Expressions like Axis of Evil are metaphoric. There's further use of language like this called metonyms and synecdoche. This is sort of random stuff that linguists throw around.

Metonym is an attribute of a thing, **synecdoche** is a part of a thing. "Here come the hired hands" is synecdoche; it refers to workers by their (relevant) parts. "Lend me your ears" (listen to me) is a metonym; it refers to what ears do, which is hearing. The two concepts are very closely related, and they are words that are thrown around in critical circles.

And just because I don't know where else to put it: **Essentialism**. This is referring to someone on the basis of essential traits. You make a comment about women that references the fact that they bear children, for instance.

Art

So those are some of the major ideas that inform that thing that we're calling Postmodernism. But that raises the question, how and why did these marginally related ideas become a separate movement.

And the answer is, they didn't. Or more to the point, there is no single "movement" that can be called Postmodernism. Sure, plenty of people will do their level best to provide some unified field theory of pomo that attempts to encompass every possible permutation, but in fact, one of the distinguishing characteristics of postmodernism is its lack of pure distinguishing characteristics. Unlike, say, gothic architecture, where you can provide a list of attributes and anything that has those attributes is gothic and anything that doesn't, isn't, postmodernism can be very elusive. Of course, there are clear-cut examples, and we'll talk about some of them, but there are plenty of less clear-cut examples. For instance, I have seen Philip Johnson's glass house referred to as Modern, and then again as Postmodern, in reputable publications from knowledgeable critics. Well, folks, it can't be both, so which is it? As I say, we'll stick to the easy examples.

Which brings us back to the issue of artists. Throughout Caveman we've been using art and artists as touch points, as examples of what we're talking about. Also, we've discussed artists as synthesizers of the ideas of their times. No work of art exists in a cultural vacuum. A painter in the Renaissance was affected by the ideas floating around in the times, regardless of whether those ideas referred directly to art. Painters listened to music. Writers wondered about politics. Everybody is a citizen of their times. The same is true of the postmodern period, which perhaps more than any we've discussed so far is defined by art. The artist who keeps an ear to the ground, the artist who thinks, the artist who tries to make a statement, has, one way or another, been exposed to the ideas we've been talking about in this section. The artist has heard about semiotics, about signs and metaphors, about the meaning of language and the working of the brain. The artist has thought about structuralism, boiling works of art down to their process with no interest in result. The artist has heard about deconstruction, and the exclusion of minority voices. The artist has learned that the powerful decide right and wrong. The artist has seen how reality has become unreality, how real life has become a theme park. The artist has done or thought all of these things, or some of these things. The artist may have read original sources, or may have picked it up on the streets. The artist may understand Foucault or Baudrillard or Derrida, or has come up with a unique bastardized version that blends them all in one intellectual bouillabaisse. It doesn't matter, because right or wrong, these are the ideas of the time. And with all of these ideas in that artistic little head, the artist acts.

The artist creates art.

But that is neither here nor there, at the moment.

The biggest abettor of the pomo artist is the pomo critic. Literally. There is thought that some postmodern art cannot exist without critics to explain it. In modernism, art was what artists said was art. In postmodernism, art is what critics say is art.

There's a big difference between the two. And however you slice it, you know that the end result is not a painting that you can walk up to and look at and say, that's very pretty, I'd like to hang that in my living room. (Except, of course, in those cases of ironic postmodernism, but we'll just be taking this subject so far in this essay...)

So, with postmodernism in mind, let's look at the arts one more time (after which we'll look at some specific areas of debate—you knew we'd get there eventually).

You might say that art in the postmodern age draws no distinction between itself and reality. How do you tell the difference? After all, much of our reality (according to Baudrillard) is an attempt to recreate the unreality of the disneyesque. Or, if you're a semiotician, you know that there can be no reality, only individual perceptions of sensory data.

Some artists become extremely political, usually in aid of a single disempowered group.

Some artists use the reality/unreality thing to inject irony into their work. Irony is a key concept of postmodern art. Maybe it's just another word for self-consciousness, but its also consciousness of the structures in which the artist is working.

Some artists no longer separate themselves from their art (i.e., performance artists). In the postmodern, among other things, it's about the narrator.

Let's start with "Gallery Art." How do you account for a pile of dirt on the floor? At the Pompidou Centre in Paris, there is a room with a pile of dirt on the floor. There is a little card naming this work of art, and providing the identity of the artist.

How in the name of all that is holy is this a work of art, or is the person who dumped this dirt on the floor an artist? Did the artist even actually do the dumping, or did he hire some day laborers?

Well, the art itself won't tell you. The artist won't tell you. But the fact that this pile of dirt is in a museum tells you that it must be a work of art, otherwise it wouldn't be here. But it is obviously not a work of art that requires artistic skill. It does require critical skill, however, either on the part of the artist or the museum curator or someone who has convinced the necessary people that, yes, this pile of dirt is a work of art.

Here's where the critics come in. They'll be happy to tell you why this is a work of art. Talk to them; don't talk to me. I like paintings of pretty landscapes.

Hanging a naked human being on the wall is art. Machines that destroy themselves are art. A pile of bricks is art.

There's an example in Butler's *Postmodernism* of a gallery display that consisted of a sign saying that there was no gallery display. This too is art.

How do these things qualify? All of them reflect irony, consciousness of structures, a blurring of the line between art and reality. They question the very meaning of art. They challenge the meaning of art. Perhaps they reject the meaning of art.

Are they art? Is art what artists say is art? Or are these only art because critics say they're art?

Draw you own conclusions.

And go back a bit, to modernism. Go back to the time when artists learned abstraction, when artists acquired the freedom to express themselves outside the boundaries of classicism, when paint was about paint and color was about color and perspective was about perspective. Where does the thinking artist go from there? Those statements have already been made. What statements does today's artist have to make?

And here's the chief difference, in art, between modernism and postmodernism. Georgia O'Keeffe, a quintessential modernist, painted flowers, among other things. They may or may not look like flowers but, as she said, they are flowers the way she feels them. She was painting to express her inner self. The result is an abstraction of flowers. That is modernism to the core. It is individualism to the core. By comparison, the postmodern artist makes an intellectual statement of some sort where the feelings of the artist, and the structural issues of art (e.g. color or perspective), are coincidental if involved at all. The postmodern artist (often in collusion with critics) comments on what art is or ought to be often by doing nothing we would normally think of as artistic. They've gone beyond structure. They've gone beyond modernism and the individual.

So in a way, you can see where the pile of dirt came from. Marcel Duchamp took a urinal and said it was art because he, as an artist, determined what it was that got to be the thing called art. It's a short step from this inceptive declaration to the Pompidou's pile of dirt.

Literature, like all areas of art, must also deal with the concept of what happens after modernism. What happens after we have allowed unbridled personal expression, to the point of incomprehensibility (i.e., *Finnegans Wake*)?

One result of going around expressing your individuality every two seconds is a fairly full sense of self. You could say that the journey into the self is infinite, and perhaps it is, but honestly, it probably can't support infinite canvasses, especially infinite written canvasses. Once we went as far as we can go individually, and wrote about it, we found out a couple of things: we found out most of what there was to find out about ourselves, and we learned that, in general, books about that were pretty boring. Think about it. Of all the art areas we've been talking about as we've adhered to the concept of narrative, literature is obviously the most directly narrative. Literature specifically sets out to tell a story (usually); storytelling is not only its goal, it's its substance. Literature that does not tell stories is whatever you want to call it, but pretty obviously it's not basic storytelling. And if literature is, substantively and purposefully, storytelling, than sooner or later experiments in non-narrative literature are going to peter out.

And, historically, they did. As with everything we're talking about, plenty of writers never paid much attention to modernism and therefore today don't pay much attention to postmodernism, but those writers who are intrigued by the ideas of the pomos have done some interesting work.

In literature that is deliberately postmodern, the defining aspect may be the irony of the material. Pomo lit is self-conscious in a way non-pomo isn't. Pomo writers have gone back to storytelling, but that storytelling is informed with the self-conscious knowledge of the past and of the structures of storytelling itself. So you see a lot of archetypal genre work and pastiches, for instance. If someone writes a mystery story, instead of calling it *The Case of the Missing Bride*, they call it *Mystery Story*. Elements in the story are reduced to their essences. And we often see and feel the author winking at us.

One nice result of postmodern thinking is the acceptance of minorities as important literary voices (although the material itself may or may not be postmodern). For that matter, minorities are not only accepted but sought after in music and painting and all areas of art. This empowerment of the formerly disempowered has come about for a variety of reasons, but one of them certainly is as an end result of activism originated in deconstructionism. Not that pomo has ended racism by any means, or any -ism, but at least in some intellectual circles some eyes have been opened, and that has to be seen as a good thing.

There is a variety of reading you could do if you wanted to explore postmodern literature. I'm going to make three recommendations.

First, there is Alain Robbe-Grillet. Conveniently French, Robbe-Grillet is identified with the *nouvelle roman*, the new novel. *Project for a Revolution in New York* is a perfectly good start. Much of the action is a subway train riding through the tunnels of the city. Robbe-Grillet's style is key to his content.

Second, there is Umberto Eco, an Italian semiotician who wrote, among other things, *The Name of the Rose*. Eco's content deals with narrative and identity. In *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* a man wakes up remembering all the books he read, but nothing of himself. In the way we might describe it, he seems to have all the dots in his brain but no connection for them. Interesting reading.

Third, which I'll describe in a little detail, is Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. As far as postmodernism is concerned in literature, Auster is It. *City of Glass* is the perfect example of pomo because it is completely invested in discussing identity and meaning. The hero, Quinn, is a writer who writes under a pseudonym, and who identifies most with the hero of the pulpy mystery novels that he writes pseudonymously. His own life, and his pseudonym's life, seem empty. One night he gets a phone call (a wrong number?) asking to speak to the detective, Paul Auster. Eventually Quinn claims to be Auster. (Question one: who is the narrator here?)

Quinn goes on the case and learns about a wild child situation, which explores the nature of language. There is the concept of the correct name of things. For example, an umbrella is an item composed of top and spokes that keeps you dry. What do you call it when its function is no longer served? The Biblical Adam gave all things their correct names. After the fall, we only have made-up names (which connects to the concepts of semiotics).

There's plenty more than this to Auster's story, and if you want to explore the linguistic and identity issues of pomo, I know of no better starting point.

We've been talking a lot about architecture up to now because architecture is an interesting subject that usually gets overlooked in high school discussions of art. But architecture is BIG because buildings are big. The meaning of buildings, of living space and public space, are every bit as important to our lives as the art that inhabits these spaces. It's been a bit indulgent perhaps, but there are some illustrative aspects to architecture that do make the subject of modernism and postmodernism clearer.

As in many areas, often modernism and postmodernism are confused by architectural critics, and one building will be called one by one critic and the other by another critic. I already mentioned Johnson's glass house, This doesn't help us too much, but there are some key ideas in the postmodern that are good to know.

In modernism, the great big glass and steel construction devoid of decoration was an enormous breakthrough in building. The steel that can raise a building to record-breaking heights didn't exist when the Romans were going around building arches. The mechanics of building changed completely when materials became available that were strong enough to shape a building any way you wanted it. The modernists were able to build big, tall buildings without having to support them with arches and buttresses and columns and thick walls. Thanks to modern steel, the stresses of the materials will not make the building fall down. The Romans couldn't have built anything as tall as, say, the UN because the physics are impossible. Modern steel changes the physics.

The modernist building may be the simplest, easiest to understand piece of modernism, if you limit your discussion to buildings like the UN or the Seagram's Building or any glass and steel box. These buildings reach for the sky in a faceless, futuristic, shiny way devoid of decoration. Their open spaces are clean and spare. They speak intimately of their time and place.

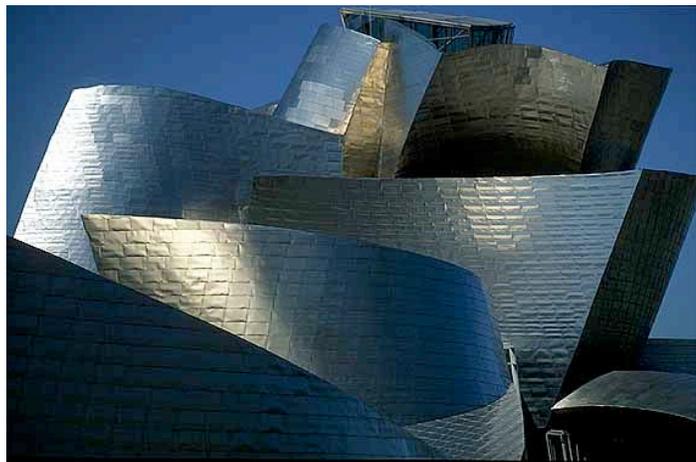
They have the personality of an empty tomb.

Architecture has some unique aspects that differentiate it from other art forms. All architecture is public, and much architecture is wildly expensive. It is enduring, lasting not only years or decades but possibly even centuries. And it permeates our lives: I can avoid music or books or paintings, but I work in a building and I live in a building, catch a train from a building, get tried for murder in a building, make laws in a building, etc., etc., etc. Certain buildings carry enormous (metaphoric?) symbolism in their cultures. These unique aspects of architecture make architects into some of our most conscious artists. By the same idea that you can't successfully build a skyscraper from mud, you can't get buildings built that don't fit into their place and time; no one will give you the money if your ideas don't appeal to them. So more than any other artist, architects are beholden to their audiences, before they even create their works. It's a strange situation. And your major architects, as a result, are some of your most interesting thinkers. And like any thinkers, they absorb the ideas of their times.

In our case, their postmodern times...

One last thing before looking at some examples. Thanks to further developments in building materials and techniques like computer modeling, architects are now able to do things that were unthinkable even fifty years ago at the height of modernism. To some extent, at least visually, the laws of physics no longer apply. Or maybe put better, architecture is subject to different laws. Given that the laws of physics are the paint and easel of the architect, you can start to understand what that means. The easiest, most familiar example to us may be the modern roller coaster. Till recently, you had nothing but wood and nothing but pure gravity moving cars over tracks, rolling and coasting. There is absolutely no difference between the very first wooden roller coaster and a wooden roller coaster built this year. Compare steel roller coasters. Inversions, loops, four dimensions—you start to get the picture.

Frank Gehry is emblematic of modern architecture. Much of his work can be seen as a response to the stripped-down modernist approach. Thanks to computer modeling and new materials, he is able to build buildings that have massive metal roofs that emulate clouds or waves. (Seek out the Guggenheim in Bilbao.) He no longer needs to worry about holding up his roof, so his roofs bear no resemblance to any roofs of the past. Domes, schmomes. He builds buildings that twist and twirl around each other with no straight lines. (Check out Fred and Ginger in Prague.) These are exercises in



form irrespective of function, doing what he can because he can, exhilarating in freedom from the old proscriptions of materials and physics. He is attempting to answer the question, if buildings can be anything at all, what should they be?

Rem Koolhaas is a visionary architect attempting to answer the same question. Search him out yourself to see what I mean. But to give one example, think about skyscrapers. Skyscrapers are very much apotheosized by the modernist, when you can build pretty much as high as you want with tempered steel and you end up creating entire avenues of New York consisting of one glass tombstone after the other (6th Avenue in the 40s and 50s). It is curious that the modernist expression of self, as we've described it in other areas, often comes up with an anti-humanist, faceless shape in architecture. Certainly Wright's Guggenheim building is modernist and anything but anti-humanist, but the trend that took hold and that provided a blueprint (theoretically) for other work in the modernist world was the glass box because it was, ultimately, cheap, and not particularly hard to design, so you didn't need to hire a Wright or a Gehry to build it. Any schlub would do. Hence 6th Avenue from 42nd Street to 57th Street.

If anything can easily define Koolhaas, it is one of his (unbuilt) designs for a skyscraper. A skyscraper at its best reaches up for the sky, is as tall as can be, stretching the grasp of humankind. Taiwan One. WTC. Sears Building. These buildings speak of our grasp of the infinite (hey, allow me a little poetry, will you?).

By contract, Koolhaas's skyscraper is in the shape of a U. Upside down. His skyscraper reaches for the sky, gets halfway there and changes its mind and comes down again. It is the perfect reply to the overreaching mind that simply wants its building to be taller than every other building to make the rather dull statement (nowadays, at least) that I'm the biggest gun on the street. When you attempt to build the world's tallest building, you are making a civic statement (which inevitably seems to be confined to emerging economies of one sort or another). When your skyscraper doesn't bother anymore, the irony and self-consciousness is perfect. I love it.

Baudrillard talked about the taking of real life and turning it into a theme park, first inside the gates of an actual theme park, and then spilling over outside the gates to the point where attempts



to recreate reality were informing reality itself. Postmodernist architecture can also do this, in spades, because the freedom from the restraints of materials can be taken so far as to be freedom from the restraints of reality. Hence, two examples of postmodernist theme architecture, high end and low end.

At the high end, the Team Disney Building. There are seven columns. They are designed as, literally, the seven dwarfs. This is a highly respected building, applauded as a great example of postmodernism.

At the low end, and this is just one example, there is now a clothing franchise in malls where each store has a tropical porch entrance. I mean, literally, a porch with a little roof. This is essence of pomo. Obviously you do not need a roof on a storefront that is indoors. And secondly, the use of the tropical theme is to create a special unreality in aid of commerce that is, in

Baudrillardian terms, the end of life on the planet. (Commerce as a negative force is certainly an aspect Baudrillard examines in his work.)

In these examples we see one of the other touchstones of postmodern architecture, the capturing of ideas from other places. Using pyramids or domes or Native American designs or, well, you name it, to set a theme that is separate from the place itself.

To see this on the grandest scale, buy a ticket to Las Vegas.

So is there any summary of all of this? Probably not. Art in the world today is so complex and varied that it is probably an idiot's task to even think about summing it up. But we can say that, in some cases, as a response to the modern, artists have returned to narrative, but with a new understanding of what they're doing. In other cases, they throw away narrative completely and even go beyond narration (the pile of dirt).



Putting it together

What we need to ask ourselves, finally, is what the ramifications are of all of this postmodernist thinking in the realm of philosophy. While pomo hasn't necessarily overturned classical thinking, it has taken over much of academia. What does this mean for us, as beginning philosophers? With any luck, we can now start putting it all together in such a way that it makes sense as we explore the final ideas that define the postmodern. To do this, we go back to the concept we started with: Narrative.

The narrative, the expression of who we are and what we are, has been our subject from the beginning. We talked about how we invented stories to account for things we couldn't otherwise explain. We talked about how our skills kept improving and our narratives got stronger and clearer, until finally we went past narratives and started studying narration itself. We even talked about the idea that the self, each of our individual selves, is merely a personalized construct of the objective world around us. We've even toyed with the idea that there is no objective world, although our senses tell us that there's awfully good evidence to suggest otherwise. We've talked about structures and the mechanisms of narration. We've talked about how the mind works, and the idea of metaphor.

We're ready for anything now.

“A great deal of postmodernist theory depends on the maintenance of a skeptical attitude, and here the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard is essential. He argued in his *La condition postmoderne* that we now live in an era in which legitimizing ‘master narratives’ are in crisis and decline... The two main narratives Lyotard is attacking are those of the progressive emancipation of humanity—from Christian redemption to Marxist Utopia—and that of the triumph of science. Lyotard considers that such doctrines have ‘lost their credibility’ since the Second World War: ‘Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.’ ”

That's from Butler; if you understand it, you can stop reading.

The **metanarrative** is the underlying grand narrative of a society. As individuals we have unique personal narratives; a society also has a narrative. Meta, in this context, means underlying (and it doesn't necessarily have to be readily apparent). Lyotard is saying that the West is guided by the narratives of Christianity and Marxism and by the narrative of the progress of science. He says that these are teleological, dialectic concepts. And that our “postmodernism” is skepticism about them. (That's why irony plays a role in pomo art.) Pomo is skepticism about any overarching explanation for things, or any underlying rationale for things. In fact, one of the knocks against postmodernism is that while it is rife with skepticism, it isn't exactly bursting with solutions. And skepticism quickly becomes impotent cynicism. (But critics of pomo say that, not Lyotard.) And doesn't skepticism about overarching explanations for things raise the question whether the overarching explanations of postmodernism ought not also be accepted with skepticism?

So if the metanarrative is met with skepticism, where do we find truth? Well, that's a problem, because deconstruction intrinsically demands a starting position of relativism, where “truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the

judging subject.” Or, truth is in the eyes of the beholder, because individuals can only know, as individuals, what that individual knows. Worse, we take that subjective view of things to be truth. We accept the cultural metaphors. We tend to “privilege, or rely upon, what Derrida calls ‘transcendental signifiers’ such as ‘God,’ ‘reality,’ the ‘idea of man,’ to organize our discourse.” And we see things in terms of their oppositions, such as male versus female, and as a result get lots of things wrong, or too rigidly fixed. Worse, we place one above the other (Oriental inferior to Western.) We live, not inside reality, but inside our representations of it.”

Linguistics shows us that we live and think via interlocking conceptual systems based on metaphors (individual narratives, cultural narratives), “which cannot be reduced in any way to a ‘more literal’ language and so are very unlikely to be simply or systematically compatible with one another.” Language always fails to convey what it attempts to explain, according to Derrida.

One result of this (all of which is from Butler) is that history is pretty useless. You can’t have objective history because all “meaning is generated by socially encoded and constructive discursive practices that mediate reality so much that they effectively close off direct access to it [Alun Munson].” This is pretty important LD-wise, because it means that whenever we consult a historian, that historian is, intrinsically, unreliable. So when someone makes an argument that you can’t trust X because he was a yadda yadda yadda and didn’t understand Blacks/women/gays/whatever, that’s what they’re saying. Unfortunately, you similarly can’t trust Blacks/women/gays/whatever as historians, because they too are only able to see their own narratives. History is nothing but competing narratives

Great. Now what do we do? That is, as it turns out, key to critiquing criticism. If no one can be trusted, are we supposed to just give up?

At its most ludicrous, as Butler points out, postmodernism even criticizes science as nothing but competing narratives. As I said, the problem with not believing in objective reality is that you must toss out all measures of objectivism. One would guess, therefore, that few physicists are postmodernists. Or relativists, for that matter. They’ve got enough problems distinguishing between matter and energy, I guess.

“The most important postmodernist ethical argument concerns the relationship between discourse and power. A ‘discourse’ here means a historically evolved set of interlocking and mutually supporting statements, which are used to define and describe a subject matter. Crudely, it’s the language of the main intellectual disciplines, for example the ‘discursive practices’ of law, medicine, aesthetic judgment, and so on. These discourses, as used by lawyers, doctors and others, do not just implicitly accept some kind of dominating theory to guide them... They involve politically contentious activities, not because of the certainty with which they describe and define people—who is an ‘immigrant,’ or an ‘asylum seeker,’ or a ‘criminal,’ or ‘mad,’ or a ‘terrorist’—but because such discourses at the same time express the political authority of their users.

Shades of Foucault! Knowledge and power unite to enforce a normalizing discourse on some disempowered group. Apply that to Blacks/women/gays/whatever.

And when your opponent argues Foucault, reply that, since Foucault avoids any moral theories and therefore no ethical measure of right and wrong, even if we were to accept Foucaultian analysis, we are given, at the source, no course of action. And that, my friend, is a very big knock against pomo. All cynicism, no action.

“The extraordinary achievement of Foucault and those who thought like him was, given their analysis of the workings of power, to go on to make one of the most influential of postmodernist claims—the claim that such discourses entailed, imposed, demanded ... a particular kind of *identity* for those who were affected by them. In postmodernist jargon, they ‘*constitute the subject*.’ That is, the metanarrative *imposes* an individual narrative. A human being is “not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, [is] perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change.” [Catherine Belsey] Individuals are caught in their cultural narratives, they are held captive by it. And if they are on the wrong side of the dichotomy (black instead of white, aboriginals instead of colonists), they are by default getting the short end of the narrative stick.

But the problem remains, for us as ethicists. Even granting all of this, how do we find some way out of it? The pomos don’t seem to offer a map. If your opponent is arguing this material, that may be the fatal flaw, where your analysis does provide potential change, while your opponent’s only provides explanations of what needs to be changed.

If identity is so based on culture, and so malleable, and so little in the hands of the individual, you can see why postmodernist art might be about the narrator. The narrator, in his or her new complexity, becomes rather fascinating. Not merely a self, the individual is a process, a result of the social narrative. What does that mean if you happen to be an individual? Auster, in *City of Glass*, assumes all of this, and then wonders what that means in a novel.

All of these ideas are complex, and many, when discussed by their creators, are contradictory. And they are certainly rife with jargon. Still, they’re interesting. That’s why artists like them. But as we said, artists often get these ideas wrong, or jumble them all up. That’s why studying postmodern art can be frustrating. It’s hard enough trying to understand the source material, but art is, in effect, a criticism of the source material, an attempt by someone else to understand and utilize that material. Maybe they get it right, maybe they get it wrong. So of course it’s frustrating. If art is conceptual—it’s not the object that matters but the concept behind it—we’ve gone to the absolute extreme of understandability. I can look at a Rembrandt and figure out just about everything there is to figure out about it. Certainly the concept of Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer is absolutely clear in every aspect. How do I understand the concept of art where that art is a sign on the gallery door saying that there is no exhibition? Which was, in fact, an actual work of conceptual art. How do we explain that? How do we understand that? I’ll give you a hint. It is, to a degree, a critique of the “museum-gallery complex,” analogous to the “military-industrial complex.” Oy. Art gets awfully complicated in the postmodernist universe. And sometimes perverse, and outright silly. Which may be why plenty of contemporary artists are simply not postmodernist. It is a conscious choice an artist makes. They don’t all choose it. But still, think about it. Even in the art world, the Foucaultian model of knowledge and power is clear. The power and knowledge are in the hands of those who mount exhibitions. They determine what is good art and what is bad art.

Pity the poor artist, who doesn't seem to get a vote...

Anyhow, here's the bottom line. All of our postmodernists do a great job of providing a way to see our universe. It is neither a right way nor a wrong way. It is a metaphor. Is language reality? Is there a reality? Do metanarratives determine individual narratives? Who cares! The point is, these are often good ways of trying to understand what is going on around us. There are also other good ways. No offense, folks, but the suffragists had pretty clear ideas about human rights and the position of women in society long before there was such a thing as critical feminist theory. Use pomo ideas as aids in understanding things. They are a metaphor for the way things are. Marx was a metaphor for the way things are. So was Freud. So was Locke. So was Plato. So was...so was...so was.....

After all of this, finally, you must be wondering, what does this mean to debate?

In our understanding of topics, you can combine some or all of the above:

Semiotics—the underlying meanings of signs and signifiers, the power of language

Structuralism—looking at how all things or a certain sort work, rather than just one or two examples

Intrinsic meanings rather than extrinsic results

Deconstruction—look for repression in exclusion (usually in exclusionary language)

Foucault—the powerful define the normative

Metanarrative determines personal narrative

So is there a summary for all of this? Of course not.

We started as cavemen with the creation of imperfect narratives to account for the fact that we had an imperfect understanding of reality. Today, as Frenchmen, we say that there is no reality, and all narratives are by definition imperfect.

Welcome to the 21st Century.

Goodbye, and thanks for all the fish.