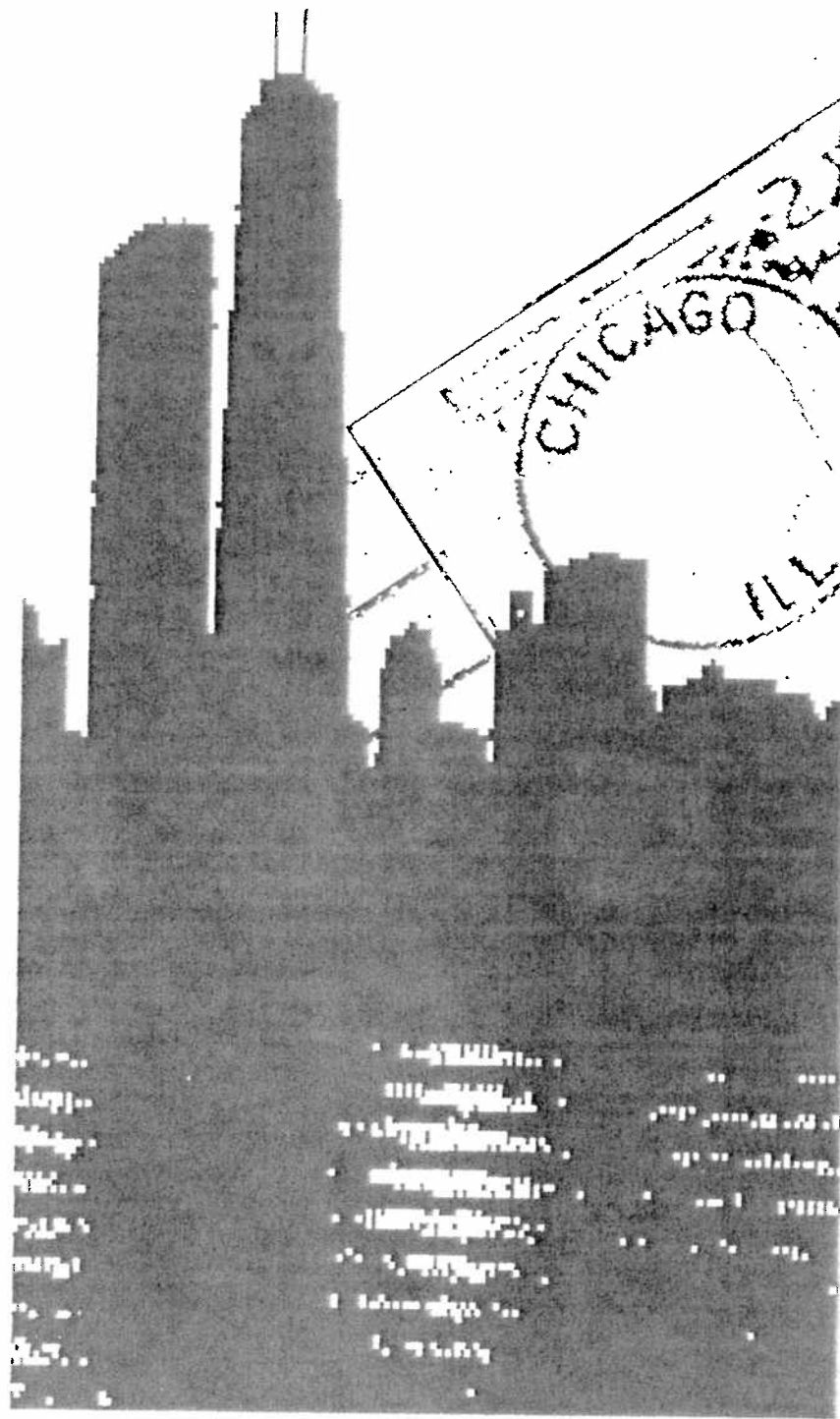


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John F. Sherry, Jr. and Brian Sternthal, Editors

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Postmodernism, Consumer Culture and the Society of the Spectacle

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INTRODUCTION

The notions of modernism (or modernity) and postmodernism (or postmodernity) are currently a subject of great debate across many disciplines. Featherstone (1988) lists several fields where this debate has been raging for some years in the Western world: art (including music), fiction, film, and photography, architecture, philosophy and literary criticism. Recently, the debate has entered the social sciences, and in particular into cultural and social anthropology, sociology, political theory and social theory. In the field of consumer behavior specific attention to postmodernism is limited and is quite recent (Firat 1989, Firat and Venkatesh 1992, Sherry 1990, Venkatesh 1989). However, there has been a burgeoning of research in a related area, now known as post-positivism, as represented in the contributions of Belk, Hirschman, Holbrook, Mick, Anderson and Ozanne, O'Guinn, Thompson, Wallendorf, to name an important few.

Postmodernism, unlike postpositivism which it subsumes, represents a more fundamental historical development signifying an emerging cultural condition that stands both as an extension of modernism and as its critique. This paper is an attempt to capture some of the main ideas represented within postmodernism and its relationship to consumer culture.

BACKGROUND

The focus of attention in this paper is postmodernism. The prefix "post" refers to something that comes after something else--in this case, modernism. Similarly, that which came before modernism is called premodernism. For the sake of keeping the analysis a little simple, we might say that these three concepts, premodernism, modernism and postmodernism represent three different periods in the history of the West. In each of these periods, the basic focus is on the "individual" and his/her relationship to the external world. Thus in the premodernist period, the philosophical focus was on the concept of "being," that is, on human existence and the relationship of "being" to God and the Universe. In the modernist period, the focus shifted from "being" to "knowing", or from existence to cognition. In this period, the main concern was to understand the individual as a "knowing (or cognitive)" subject and the external world as a rational social order. In the postmodernist period, there is a further shift from the knowing subject to the "communicative" subject and in the case of the external world from a rational to a symbolic system. The question then is, how has this entity whom we call a human-BEING, who later became a knowing-subject, now become a communicative subject. Similarly, how do we account for the macro shift from a rational to a symbolic system. Using a more technical language, we might say that the individual seems to be moving from a cognitive world (modernism) to a semiotic

world (postmodernism)--the world of knowledge acquisition and production to a world of symbol and sign manipulation. Before we proceed to develop fully the notion of postmodernism, it is important to understand what modernism (or modernity, an equivalent concept) stands for.

Modernity refers to the last three hundred years of Western history during which many of the current ideas were developed. To quote Habermas (1981 p.9), "The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life."

Some people argue that there is no single idea (metanarrative) or a universalistic principle that is associated with modernity. We can, however, glean a cluster of closely related ideas in the various descriptions of modernity: the rule of reason and the establishment of rational order; the emergence of the cognitive subject; the gradual secularization of human thought and the decline of religion in the conduct of human affairs, the rise of science and an emphasis on material progress as the goal of the scientific enterprise; realism, representation, and the unity of purpose in art, architecture and science; the emergence of industrial capitalism and the separation of the spheres of production as an institutionally controlled public activity from consumption as a domestically defined private activity.

If one were to describe the central characteristic of modernist narrative, it refers to a period when the individual is defined as a "knowing" subject, an autonomous agent working within a social and economic order which was driven by the power of reason. In the modernist ethos, knowledge serves an instrumental purpose, as a tool for improving the material conditions of human life on this planet. Thus, human life is considered in terms of here and now, and there is little reference to life after we leave this planet, as was the case in the premodernist period. The focus of all knowledge is, therefore, the living life that occurs between birth and death. Improvement necessarily means building on what was available in the past. Thus the progression of knowledge becomes linear, futuristic and goal oriented--or as philosophers call it teleological. The goal of knowledge in modernism is to make it possible for conditions of material life to improve and to make the linear progression towards better life possible. It also means improving the cognitive capacities of individual minds and enhancing their reasoning skills and abilities so they can make better judgements. The

social system accordingly expects to better prepare its members to apply their knowledge to socially determined goals. Individuals become investments and society rewards them in terms of how well they perform in this rationalist enterprise.

The positive assessment of modernity usually runs as follows: the process of modernity has improved the human condition and led to material progress beyond imagination. It is generally known that, in today's world, modernization is a goal that many traditional societies aspire for and toward which they have committed their national resources. The global shift to industrialization and the easing of economic restrictions in command economies, coupled with the move toward individual growth and privatization, constitute a signal that what is modern is desirable and what is desirable must be attained.

What are the implications of the idea of modernity for consumer research? The hallmark of consumer culture is the creation of products and services which have both use value and exchange value. Marketing practice is based on the knowledge that helps achieve its main goal of creating "marketable products," a term that has come to mean everything from shampoo to religion. Since modernity represents the rise of capitalism which legitimates the exploitation of both nature and culture for the pursuit of wealth accumulation, marketing becomes the consummate instrument in creating the ethos of consumption with which we are all identified.

The question now is, how and why would this modernist model be subject to change, or why do we speak in terms of a new paradigm. Of course, there is no implication here that somehow the period called modernism has suddenly ended, or will soon come to an end. It is just that we see some anomalies, some cues which suggest that perhaps the assumptions and conditions subsumed under modernity need to be scrutinized. So we ask the question what these cues are and what are the postmodernist tendencies that are relevant here.

LATE MODERNISM, CRITIQUE OF MODERNISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF POSTMODERNISM

We shall now briefly discuss some emerging themes in the modernism/postmodernism debate.

The first theme centers around the idea of the post-industrial state as enunciated by Daniel Bell (1973) and his contemporaries in the late sixties and early seventies. Here the essential idea is that the industrial societies are moving toward a new phase in their evolution. This new phase which may be called "post-industrial" differs from "industrial" as industrial was from "pre-industrial." The basic difference between industrial and post-industrial is that the latter is distinguished by the domination of information oriented industries and the centrality of information technology in both production and consumption sectors. Since it is generally acknowledged that we have already entered the so-called information age, this issue, as presented by Bell, is less contested now.

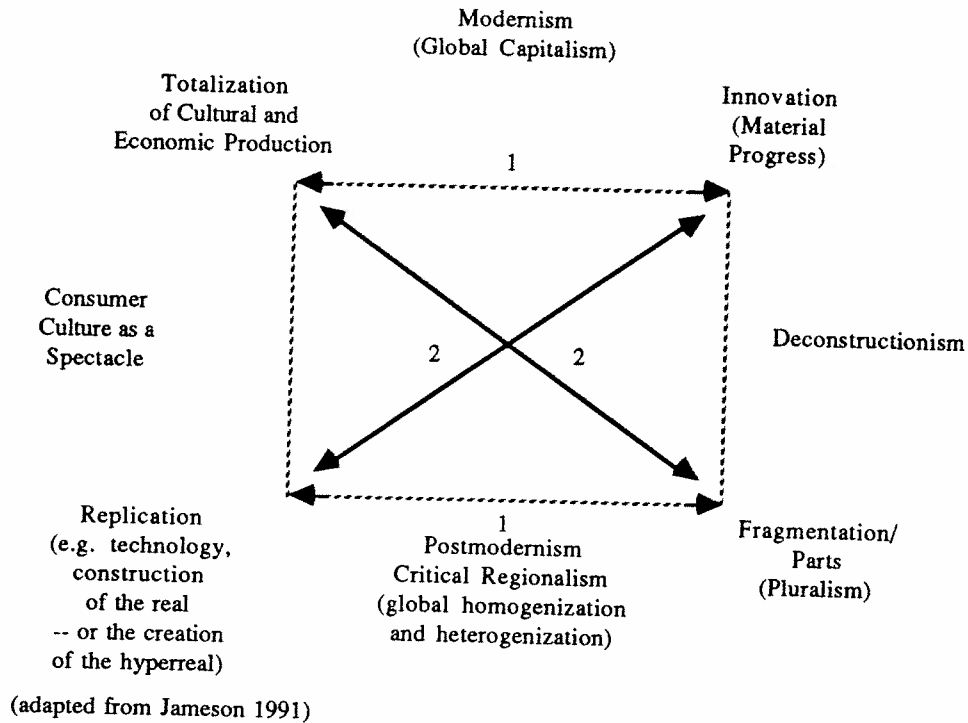
A second theme on modernity is directed towards its paradoxical character. This has to do with

the ideality and reality in modernity. Under conditions of modernity, real becomes hyperreal, representation becomes interpretation, substance becomes form, objects become images, and modernism begins to be consumed in its own images. Modernism, while incorporating uniqueness, produces fragmentation, while emphasizing real produces the imaginary and the hyperreal, while stressing representational fidelity in art and science produces illusions by a clever application of technologies, and while exalting the bourgeois subject into a privileged position alienates him/her and then fragments him/her. Thus the paradox of modernity is the unconnectedness of its ideality to its reality. In this sense modernity is viewed as a myth, or more exactly, its own myth, the myth of modernism. Consequently, the postmodernists would argue that the purpose of their critique is to lay bare the myth of modernity and confront it on its own terms. This is also the celebratory notion of modernity, that is, its liberation from its own constraints. This is also the beginnings of symbolism (as opposed to rationalism) as the basis of human discourse.

A third theme refers to the idea that modernism has run its course, giving way to new forms of representation, new social movements, and an emerging global order in which no single idea dominates, and in which a diversity of forms, however contradictory, can coexist. Jameson (1983) calls this, a pastiche, which signifies a juxtaposition of unrelated ideas, consumer experiences, and historical moments, all packaged and offered to the public. In this scenario, what replaces modernism is not a single postmodernism but several postmodernisms, all competing for attention.

A fourth theme has to do with the scopic regimes of modernity and the accumulation of spectacles as the basis of representation. The notion of representation is fundamental to modernistic thought. The original meaning of representation was the capturing or comprehending of "objective reality" through direct observation, or artistic transformation (eg., painting, photography etc.), or scientific modelling. Representation has also come to mean the construction of the real as conceived by human cognition without reference to objective reality. This means reality intervention is possible either by the application of technology or other forms of human control. The construction of reality therefore suggests that reality is not always treated as a given but subject to manipulation for aesthetic or commercial purposes. Such a notion of representation lies at the heart of the market culture, as witnessed in the design of products, in packaging, in creating spectacular shopping environments and other private and public spaces, and even in the making of the modern human body through various technologies and means of control. These cultural possibilities have prompted different interpretations from contemporary critics. Benjamin's essay on the "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Debord's "Society of the Spectacle," and Baudrillard's "Simulations," and "Fatal Strategies" are but a few examples in this direction. All these pertain to the moments of intervention with

FIGURE 1
Greimasian Semiotic Square of Modernism and Postmodernism



the real and the creation of the visual in what Martin Jay (1988) calls the "scopic regime of modernity."

The philosophical basis of the visual can be traced to Cartesian perspectivalism which according to Jay is the essence of the occularcentric culture which characterizes the society of spectacle. As Jonathan Crary (1988) argues about Western visual tradition, "the emergence of photography and cinema in the nineteenth century is a fulfillment of a long unfolding technological and/or ideological development in the West in which the camera obscura evolves into the photographic camera." As he further notes, "the abstraction and exchangeability of visual experience is intimately connected to economic and social transformations." That is to say, modernism has fused cultural forms into industrial/economic spheres of activity. The notion of the visual, a cultural transformation that is integral to the development of the spectacle is basic to the development of consumer culture where the visual imagery and the "reality" collide. The visual field, the argument goes, is commodified by spectacular creations which have become possible due to postindustrial technologies of reproduction, representation and information.

A fifth theme is a direct critique of modernity. Simply put, it states that modernity, in its quest for ethically ordered, rationally constructed, technologically oriented, seemingly progressive, and relentlessly unifying social order, has failed. It failed because it has alienated the individual, totalized human

life by marginalizing the lifeworld, and reduced form and substance into a single category of implosion. This condition of loss has resulted in considerable self-doubt, and has led to pluralistic modes of life through a desperate search for alternatives. This is what Lyotard (1984) calls the postmodern condition, or a condition arising out of a failure of modernity to truly emancipate the individual. Thus as a critique of modernism, postmodernism represents a realization that there is no single truth but multiple realities, all are legitimate and all equally valid; that individuals, societies and economies are not governed solely by instrumental reason but are subject to historical and cultural processes that cannot be explained by reason alone; that the human being is not necessarily the center of the universe; that modernism is itself an egregious male oriented conceptualization of the world and has consistently retarded female participation in human affairs (hence the emergence postmodern feminism); that capitalism is not the only desirable form of economic order; that progress does not mean marching linearly toward a predetermined goal; that the quality of life need not be measured in economic and material terms only; and that in human affairs aesthetic judgement is just as important as economic judgement.

As an extension of modernism (as opposed to a critique), postmodernism represents certain other developments. They relate to the burgeoning of new technologies, the changing nature of the global order,

and the development of new forms of aesthetic consciousness and knowledge structures.

Finally, we propose a Greimasian semiotic square to depict the relationship between modernism and postmodernism (Figure 1). The square also serves to represent the general boundaries of discussion for this debate. Using a system of contraries and contradictories, we argue that modernism and postmodernism stand in opposition to each other in the following way. Modernism, in economic terms, represents global capitalism which in turn is comprised of two key elements, (a) totalization of culture and economic production and (b) "innovation" as its transcendental telos, signifying the modernist imperative of relentless creation of things that are new, in an effort to keep moving ahead constantly, all the time. Postmodernism is represented in the figure in opposition to modernism with emphasis on pluralism (fragmentation) and the principle of replication. Replication stands for the reconstruction of the real, or as Baudrillard calls it the creation of the hyperreal.

To conclude, we quote from Featherstone (1991) as the main problematic of postmodernist debate, "A central intention in this [analysis] is to understand how postmodernism has arisen and become such a powerful and influential cultural image, and how this image has unfolded with such energy in contemporary consumer culture. This is not to assume that postmodernism is merely a deliberate "artificial" construct of disaffected intellectuals out to increase their own power potential. Far from it. Rather it is to raise questions about the production, transmission and dissemination of knowledge and culture. All developments point to the general conclusion that postmodernism has now outlived the duration of a fad, and is emerging as a powerful cultural image. This is a very good reason for social scientists and others to be interested in it. My purpose is to take the experiences and practices designated as postmodernism seriously and seek to investigate and comprehend the range of phenomena associated with this category. Yet, once we focus on actual experiences and practices, it is clear that there are similarities between these alleged postmodern experiences and practices and many of those designated as modern and even premodern. The challenge lies in differentiating between the dichotomies of modern and postmodern."

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