# Modernism Vs. Postmodernism: Definitions, Features And Ideas Dominating The Society

It is difficult to get unambiguous and understandable definitions of modernism and postmodernism. Modernism began around the time of the second industrial revolution (1870-1920), this was made evident by the decline of stable social classes, the beginning of professionalism, and ‘a sense of urban alienation’ (Matteo, 2018). “Postmodernism refers to cultural phenomena with certain characteristics that emerged after the Second World War. When exactly postmodernism starts varies according to national contexts and individual critics” (Matteo, 2018). Some people argue that postmodernism began after the Second World War and did not begin to become popular until around the 1960’s however, others argue that postmodernity did not begin until the 1980’s or 1990’s.

Modernism is scientific, objective and contains rational cause-effect arguments. It also has a belief in universal values (generalising) and a belief in progress (linearity). They believe in having a hierarchy and having a utopian society (what modernists believe to be perfect, not the general consensus of perfect. Nothing can ever truly be perfect). Modernity is western-centric with a social democratic system and is an organised, centred and purposeful movement (Bailey, n.d). Whereas postmodernism is anti-scientific, subjective, irrational and goes by chance. Postmodernity has a belief in the particular (non-generalising) and does not believe in progress (contingency). This is a populist movement whereby politicians attempt to appeal to regular people who feel their concerns are ignored by elitist groups which are also multicultural and micropolitical. This movement is seen to be chaotic, broken and anarchic (Bailey, n.d.). It is clear to see that these two movements are completely opposite to each other which may be due to the different time periods in which they were apparent as modernism is fairly old- fashioned in terms of its beliefs and ideas whereas postmodernism contains modern ideas and beliefs, however, if this movement was thought up after the Second World War, then the ideas it holds are ahead if its time as back then, while the world was becoming more liberated in terms of women’s rights and winning two World Wars, there was still a long way to go in terms of politics/ political thinking and social structure. It could be argued that the postmodernist ideology still is in progress as society is moving in that direction, for example; multicultural, populist.

As previously discussed, there are some key features of the ‘Modern’ society. Economic production is industrial and capitalist, with social class as the main form of social division - an individual's social class is based on a person’s social and economic position (the industrial society was divided into two main classes; business owners and labourers). This led to the growth of cities and urbanisation whereby thousands of people moved to cities to find work and set up homes. Local and central governments have led to the development of compulsory education for all children, public housing and the welfare state (just a few examples of many elements the government has implemented). During the time of modernisation people were beginning to look towards science and scientific explanations rather than religion and religious explanations for example; natural disasters could be explained using scientific technology (Thompson, n.d.).

Postmodernism is the more modern version of modernity which focuses on way of thinking about thought and believe that knowledge needs to be understood in a different way to groups

such as Functionalists and Marxists (which are modernist sociologist groups), and states that not all postmodernity theorists are postmodernists. There are five key features of postmodernist society which are globalisation, media, ‘a world in fragments’ (Thompson, n.d.), which is due to rapid social change, consumer society (freedom to decide your own lifestyle) and cultural diversity and hybridity.

Globalisation is the increasing connectedness between societies around the world. It has created ways for information, money and people to move freely around the globe with relative ease. The factors which make up postmodernity have led to the increase in globalisation as it is more liberal than modernity.

Media and technology widely increased during the postmodern era, more specifically the rise of the internet, which has in turn led to more people using the media and now people get most of their information and news from the media, especially social media. As technology progresses, there has been an increase in the number of people making their own music, videos (on platforms such as YouTube or Twitch), social media profiles (on Facebook, Twitter Snapchat) and uploading them to the internet where anyone and everyone can find. People with social media such as Facebook can connect with people they have not seen for a while or family members or friends who can be anywhere in the world. This can be seen as a form of globalisation due to the connectedness of individuals in societies around the world. However, this has led to the breakdown of real relationships in local communities as people do not tend to socialise with their neighbours as much now as they would have in the 20th century and perhaps even the start of the 21st century. There has however been an increase in reliance on the media which some sociologists call ‘hyperreality’ where what we see in the media is more real than reality, yet it is simultaneously different to reality. (Thompson, n.d.). There are a few examples of where hyperrealism is evident such as Disneyland being no less ‘real’ than the entirety of modern America, ‘The Gulf War did not take place’ by Jean Baudrillard, the media coverage of O.J. Simpson’s arrest and trial and the film Apocalypse Now as the point of reference when judging the realisms of other representations of the Vietnam War.

Change in postmodern society is much more rapid than in modern society, therefore, postmodern society is far more active, it is constantly moving and developing. Postmodern society has mainly affected three areas: work, fashion and music and the breakdown of local communities. In the world of work, we have entered the era of the ‘portfolio worker’ (Thompson, n.d.) which essentially means that individuals are much more likely to move and change jobs (usually more than once) throughout their lives rather than having the same job for their whole life- as was the case in the modern era. This can be linked to the breakdown of local communities as people are much more likely to move around for their jobs therefore people do not tend to get to know their neighbours as much as they would have if they had a job for life, as in the modern era, people were more likely to live in one house throughout their lives which in turn, creates a tight knit community. Fashion and music illustrate the fast pace in change as they are constantly evolving with new styles of clothing and music. Musicians/ singers and fashion designers need to constantly keep up with the latest trends in their industries in order to thrive or else they will become unpopular. However, in some cases, fashion designers for example, can bring back fashion trends from different eras, the current fashion trend has seen trends from the 1990’s becoming popular again so in some cases, artists and designers can recycle old styles and make them popular again so as we evolve, we recycle old trends and styles (Thompson, n.d.).

One key difference between the postmodern society and the modern society is that it has become a consumer-oriented culture, meaning that individuals are more concerned with consuming things and leisure activities than working. It is said that we are involved in a ‘Pick and mix’ (Thompson, n.d.) society where individuals are able to decide what they want to do with their lives, an example of this is people can choose what career path they wish to go down, regardless of gender, women can be builders or join the army (which in the modern era would have been a job for males) and men can be hairdressers or nail technicians (which would have been a job for females). Peoples futures are no longer pre-determined and individuals are- for the most part- no longer restricted in what they can and cannot do because of their gender, sexuality or race, which would have been the case in the modern era when a persons gender restricted what they could do, a persons race affected what they could do or where they could go and a persons sexuality was not particularly spoken about as being homosexual was frowned upon, but nowadays, people can openly speak about their sexuality and gender whether they are homosexual, transgender, non- binary and so on (Thompson, n.d.).

The increase in globalisation has seen a rise in cultural diversity and what is known as ‘hybridity’ which refers to different cultural traditions from around the world mixing together. Essentially, almost all elements of life are more diverse such as fashion, music, family life, goods and services, work and many more. Within the goods and services industry, we can see different sections within a shop of foods from all around the world and there are also corner shops for different cultures for a bigger variety of food than what local supermarkets have (Thompson, n.d.)

There are many postmodernist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin and Michael Foucault. First of all, Jacques Derrida was a French thinker who was influenced by the structuralist movement. He gave a twist on postmodernism which led to the development of post-structuralism. Throughout many of his books published since the 1960’s, Derrida used a mixture of philosophy, linguistics and literary analysis to form his own view on post-structuralism which goes by the name of ‘deconstruction’ (Mondal, n.d.) which does not mean that you destroy something, instead it means to break something down and analyse it to discover the underlying or even true meaning which often is different to how people generally interpret [whatever the case may be]- understanding the relationship between text and meaning.

The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction by Walter Benjamin was a basis theory of postmodernity, which at that point had not yet been made the official term, the core of this concept was manifested by Benjamin himself; “one of fragmentation, dissolution, of chaotic disorganisation” (Santos, n.d.). Benjamin referred to the growth of media technologies as ‘an age of mechanical reproduction’ (Benjamin, 1936). He discusses ‘the change in art in the modern age’ (Robinson, 2013) and how art is beginning to represent economic production. This sees Benjamin describe old art as having an ‘aura’ coming from their uniqueness which is a sensory experience of distance between the reader and the artwork. This ‘aura’ has slowly begun to disappear throughout the modern age as art has become easier to replicate through new media technologies- starting with the invention of the camera and developing to computers and software on computers which makes it easier to replicate artwork so nothing can be fully unique like old paintings and portraits were. Plus, artwork can be made a lot faster on software on computers rather than taking days/weeks/months to paint one picture. Benjamin was positive about his era of technical advance as society would no longer be subject to the aura of artwork and freer to make their own decisions on the meaning of different works of art.

Jean Baudrillard stated that we now live in an ‘ecstasy of communication’ subsequently, multiple different realities exist, co-exist and interact simultaneously. He also states that the media are simulations rather than representations, and he also mentions that there is a ‘hyper-reality’ when reality and the imaginary implode and create a place where reality and simulation are experienced without any differences (Larsen, n.d.).

Michel Foucault did not label himself as a postmodernist thinker - he preferred to present his thoughts as critical analysis of modernism-, but he was one of the front-runners of postmodernism. He defined postmodernity with two notions; discourse and power, and discourse is interpreted through power. Foucault has a very philosophical view on postmodernism and thinks more about knowledge and the power of knowledge on human beings. He found that power and knowledge is the central theme of postmodernity that links all other aspects of postmodernism together (Mondal, n.d.).

In conclusion, there is far more information on postmodernity than modernity which could be due to the fact that the timeline of modernity is far shorter than the timeline of postmodernity. Also, there is far more information and research on postmodernity, which may be due to the fact that postmodernity is ongoing especially in terms of media technologies which in turn, influences other areas of postmodernism, globalisation being an example of this. This leads to the question of whether or not postmodernism will ever end or if there will be a new form of postmodernism that will be modified for even newer technology in the future, but then again, postmodernity does often refer to new technologies as a whole- even technology that has not yet been invented, it simply mentions the advancement in media technology without setting a timeline between one time period to another so really, postmodernity could go on for hundreds of years. The theory of postmodernity is very eye-opening especially if an individual knows nothing about modernism or postmodernism, it makes people think about the world and media especially in this period of time. It depends on the individual as to whether or not they believe modernity/postmodernity is real. Looking at the theories, they are very compelling and have strong arguments but whether or not they are real depends on a person’s own view.