

## **Multimedia and Postmodernism**

This essay will outline broad differences between modernism and postmodernism, in particular, whether multimedia is a particularly postmodern phenomenon. It also will look at some ways in which multimedia affects life in the postmodern era. Finally, it will look towards the future and discuss whether postmodernism can end while multimedia exists.

### **Definition**

Modernism arose from the development of the industrial, capitalist society in the mid-eighteenth century and lasted until approximately the end of World War II. Klages (1997, <http://www.colorado.edu/English>) describes modernism as being characterised by economic and industrial production, urbanisation, a bureaucratic state, knowledge of and a belief in progress derived from scientific and rational thinking, as well as the acquisition of material possessions. Rifkin (2000, p.189) describes the modernists as people who “introduced the idea of progress. The Golden Age, they argued, lay not in a distant past, but in a negotiable future. Human ingenuity and will, not divine intervention, would lead humanity to a new earthly paradise – a Utopian world of material abundance. Underlying all of this newfound confidence was the fervently held notion that there exists, in fact, a knowable object reality. If science were used to explore its workings, and technology to harness its products, then private property would be the institution to divide up the spoils of conquest.”

The cultural, intellectual, economic and social bases of modernism have in the last several decades been replaced with postmodern ideologies. This has been a gradual shift, including some overlapping of modern and postmodern characteristics during the decades after World War II. Indeed, it is hard to identify where one period ends and another one begins. McLuhan (1997, p.238) says “... because of the invisibility of any environment during the period of its innovation, man is only consciously aware of the environment that has preceded it; in other words, an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the World”

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The key features of postmodernism include a decline in manufacturing and an increase in part-time, flexible work; the spread of globalisation; abandonment of linearity; a loss of faith in science and the end of the metanarrative (belief in a universal truth, whatever that may be, e.g. Marxism, feminism, The Bible).

Modernism and postmodernism can be compared respectively with the "old" and "new" economies. The new economy is based on digital images, text, sound, communications, computer technology, multimedia etc. compared with the old economy, which was based on agriculture, primary industry, and manufacturing. "The postmodern age is bound up in a new stage of capitalism based on commodifying time, culture and lived experience, whereas the former age represents an earlier stage of capitalism grounded in commodifying land and resources, contracting human labor, manufacturing goods, and producing basic services." Rifkin (2000, p. 188)

The defining shift and change from modernism to postmodernism can be seen with the advent of electronic computer technologies. The production, distribution, access and consumption of information and knowledge, often presented in an electronic multimedia format has revolutionised society in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It could be argued that postmodernism is best described by, and correlated with, the emergence of computer technology, starting in the 1960s, and which has become the dominant force in all aspects of postmodern life.

The concept of multimedia isn't new and has been around for many years. For example, theatre is an inherently multimedia experience. It combines music, sound, lighting, voice and narrative and has been in existence for thousands of years. By definition, multimedia means, "using or involving more than one media" (Longman Concise English Dictionary, 1997 p. 908); therefore, anything mixing more than one medium can be defined as being multimedia. However, in recent years multimedia has implied a mixing of additional features such as sounds, motion and animation, video and with an emphasis on interactivity and computers.

So is multimedia inherently postmodern? It could be argued yes, because, multimedia formats are generally perceived as being non-linear. The features which form the basis of multimedia today, are distributed, stored, and arranged differently in postmodern societies than in modern ones. Whereas the modern era was characterised by linear storage and distribution of information (for example books in libraries), postmodern information is stored and distributed in a hyper, multimedia and non-linear way. Browsing the Web is a non-linear, intuitive activity and the structure of the Web itself is non-linear and non-hierarchical. Indeed, the nature of the word 'hypertext', which forms the basis of the Internet, comes from the idea that information written in HTML is non-linear. In common terms, hyper means active, and "all over the place". The word hyper as part of HTML is similar in context. The same can be said for other forms of multimedia. Computer games and interactive CD ROMs are also very non-linear, giving the user choices and multiple paths to follow.

On the other hand, it could also be stated that multimedia isn't inherently postmodern. Multimedia in various forms has been around for hundreds, if not thousands of years, well before postmodernism was a concept. Traditional linear media, such as books, can be read in a non-linear fashion. Indeed, many a book has had only selected chapters read from it; there is no rule that says you must read a book from the start and read to the end. Books themselves are a multimedia form in that they often include text as well as images and have been around long before the rise of postmodernism. Until relatively recently, texts were not read by one person, but were read aloud in groups so a book could include word, images and sound. Traditional footnotes and referencing could arguably be the first forms of hyperlinks and this too makes researching from books and periodicals a non-linear and multimedia activity. Perhaps the argument should be that *electronic and digital* multimedia is inherently postmodern.

The rise of postmodernism has seen a change in cultural attitudes and behavior, particularly with the advent of multimedia. Darley (2000, p.182) describes the social differences which have developed since the introduction of multimedia pastimes, particularly in regard to entertainment and amusement. He argues that people living in the modernist era generally went out for their entertainment. In contrast, the postmodernist is more likely to stay at home and be entertained there with multimedia technologies. "Game consoles, video players and television sets are small objects that, with the flick of a switch, literally replace going out for amusement, presenting us with miniature – and in certain respects degraded – versions of their public relatives, turning living rooms into secluded and increasingly solitary playgrounds." Indeed, staying home to play computer games, engage with strangers or friends on the other side of the world in a chat room, watching a video or DVD, or surfing the Internet have all become popular in the last 10-20 years, particularly as the cost of multimedia technologies declines. These multimedia pastimes, which rely on interactivity and non-linear involvement, are inherently postmodern and are vastly different from previous and generally linear forms of entertainment, such as reading, needlework, going to the theatre, playing the piano, listening to the radio, etc., seen during the modern era. It is amazing to think that these postmodern pastimes didn't even exist thirty years ago.

Brown (1997) also talks about a similar phenomenon. He discusses the loss of cohesion and meeting places in the real world, like the town square, in the postmodern world. It could be argued that this is due to the rise and use of computer related entertainment and electronic multimedia which is a specifically

postmodern phenomenon. "Maybe one day an audio-visually enhanced Net can be configured to produce such a well rounded communal space; so far however, computational imperatives have directly and indirectly fragmented the centers of human cohesion.... 'Connectivity' – the technical aspect of message exchange – can never substitute for connection – which is the living and continual dialog shared between people and landscapes that surround them." (Brown, 1997 p. 243)

## **Multimedia and the future**

We are in the infancy of the new millennium. How long will postmodernism last and how will it change in the coming years? Could there ever be an end to postmodernism while multimedia exists as a communication technology? It could be argued that postmodernism could end while multimedia exists as a technology, basically because multimedia has existed long before postmodernism. Also, as there is a blurring of boundaries between each era, what may be postmodern in multimedia for example, might not be in literature. The answer to this may be found by asking what will replace multimedia in the years to come?

Science fiction writer Peter F. Hamilton (1996) writes in his *Night's Dawn Trilogy*, set in 2600 A.D., about neural nanonics. Neural nanonics are a mind/machine interface, where humans are hardwired to send and receive data/pictures/sound/multimedia with just a thought. There is no computer involved, except for the equivalent of a chip implanted in the brain. This is not just the realm of science fiction. Neural nanonics are being researched right now. See <http://www.neural-nanonics.com> Perhaps this new technology, which will essentially replace multimedia, will herald the end of the postmodern era and will launch humanity into a new era, an era in which our ability to connect with each other is enhanced and not impeded by our technology. Only time, and the benefit of 20/20 hindsight will tell.

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