Musings on the Emptiness and Dreariness of Postmodern Critique

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The first essay I remember reading on the post-isms and rhetoric was published in 1986. I was preparing a keynote address for Texas A&M's conference on communication and the culture of technology and trying to read widely. Smack dab in the middle of a book on the negative properties of technology was an essay by David Descutner and DeLysa Burnier. It was designed to blunt the critiques of poststructuralist thought rhetorically, by showing that rhetorical technique provides not only the destructive but also the constructive bases of human thought. They sought to draw a pro-rhetorical line from Protagoras to Marx to Nietzsche to de Man over and against another, anti-rhetorical line running from Plato to Derrida and the other poststructuralists. [1]

Soon thereafter, my colleague Michael McGee began working on his by now famous essay on rhetorical textualization--famous in part because he invoked, albeit reluctantly, the label "post-modern condition" as an explanation as to why our understanding of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism must change. In his words:

However we got there, the human condition has changed. Put whatever adjectives you want in front of the concept "condition." (I grit my teeth and shudder as I say it, but I think the term post-modern condition is likely to prove best.) [2]

Those changes in the human condition he described primarily in terms of the new media and technologies: direct mail, TV spots, documentaries, mass entertainment, and sound bits comprising the news, wherein "nothing in our new environment is complete enough, finished enough, to analyze--and the fragments that present themselves to us do not stand still long enough to analyze." McGee mentioned that this sort of thinking was influenced by "a voice with a French accent," with particular reference to Baudrillard's talk of simulacra. [3]

Actually, his position and that of the Descutner and Burnier essay are united in Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition was translated into English in 1984 and undoubtedly accelerated talk of poststructuralism and the postmodern condition. Lyotard's rewriting of modernist science and realistic aesthetics into a postmodern, narratively based theory of knowledge and a pastische-centered theory of aesthetics--and culture--was likely the most powerful articulation of the theory of poststructuralism and postmodernism in our time, bridging as it did epistemology, sociality, and artistic practice. [4] In various of his recent conversations on the Internet, McGee by now seems more directly to embrace Lyotard than Baudrillard.

I will come back to Lyotard later, but, for now, I wish to posit his invocation as well as McGee's of the existence of a "postmodern condition"--the assertion of a fundamental shift in life circumstances following the destruction of the so-called modern condition--as my target in this paper. I will argue that there is no such thing as a postmodern condition, strictly speaking in an essentialist way. If there were, then public rhetorical processes would be essentially changed, even eviscerated: meaning-making would be utterly instable and human agency--the ability to set in motion collective action rhetorically--would be destroyed. In other words, I take the assertion of something to be understood literally as "the postmodern condition" to be an inherently anti-rhetorical act. And I don't like it. And that's why I agreed to do this convention paper. More specifically, the denial of rhetorical efficacy is a denial of the power of human discourse, of the social force of discursivity or symbolicity. And the denial of rhetorical agency is an attack on the effectivity of
rhetorical performance—the very idea that human beings can symbolically affect on a large scale the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors shared with others through dramatically realized action.

Let me make clear at the beginning that what I see at stake in talk about postmodern rhetorical critique is social life itself. The base of sociality, I believe, is rhetorical. Social relationships are constructed, maintained, repaired, and altered rhetorically [5], that is, through systems of discourse that human beings use to build reciprocal roles and power-laden hierarchies in collectivities. Without faith in discursivity, human bonds are destroyed. Without faith in discursivity, there are no foundations for not only institutional life—politics, education, economics, religion—but no fundament from which the idea of meaning itself can arise. And, without faith in the effectivity of human rhetorical transactions, life is reduced to mere motion, to a crude kind of stimulus-and-response version of association. I cannot accept the idea of life without the hope for mutual influence grounded in shared meaning structures, that is, grounded in rhetorical transactions. [6]

All of this is not to say that I do not find the positing of a postmodern rhetoric, of a critique based on distintegration, important. On the contrary, as I will argue, it is a discursive practice or a realm of public talk with noble roots in the west. It has arisen in multiple forms historically—in forms that for me cohere in an interesting and important set of rhetorical acts that produce periodic corrections in the microscopic domain of social life. The emptiness and dreariness I note in my title, therefore, I hope will be understood as descriptive rather than judgmen
tal.

The brevity of a convention paper will force me to work with fewer examples and more constricted explanations than I’d like, but I hope you’ll understand the three propositions that I am arguing: (1) Acts of rhetorical discourse are defining and hence constitutive of social life. (2) What many call the "postmodern condition" is actually but a set of rhetorical discourses. (3) The emptiness and despair typical especially of French postmodernism is a positive sign socially and politically, a portent of recovery, reaffirmation, and redirection of social and political thought in our time.

Social Life and Rhetorical Discourses

I begin with the simple idea that human behaviors always have been experienced in fragments of consciousness. Life does not come with continuities; rather, it is episodic, a series of moments etched upon the inside of individuals' skulls. As Wilhelm Windelband rearticulates classic Protagorean relativism, "Everyone knows things not as they are, but as they are in the moment of perception for him, and for him only." [7] Or, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it a third of a century ago, "Perception is . . . paradoxical. The perceived thing is itself paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it." [8] It is this very individuality of the perceptual and hence cognitive processes endemic to human existence, together with the capability of acquiring and sharing symbols, that warrants rhetoric. Rhetorical consciousness, as George Kennedy posited that concept and as Walter Ong expanded it, [9] is foundational to shared, that is, social, life.

I would hope that such a line of thinking is acceptable to most everyone in this room. I draw from it a simple but important conclusion: our relations with others—both that which we feel together (sentiment) and that which we know together (sentience)—are recorded in discourses that foster and maintain those relations. Put otherwise, social life is managed through discursive arenas, which is to say, realms or spheres of language use—economic discourses, political discourses, religious discourses, social discourses, psychoanalytic discourses, philosophical discourses. What we understand as the world outside of our skins is jointly constructed rhetorically in various realms of talk. [10]
Postmodern Rhetoric and Critique as a Discursive Arena

From these seemingly straightforward ideas about rhetoric and sociality, then, I take as a significant implication that postmodernism is a discursive development within the great institutional discourses of collective life--within literary, philosophical (especially epistemological), architectural, social, and psychoanalytical arenas of shared thought. Postmodern critique I understand as the latest in a series of similar discourses developing throughout the twentieth century. It is related to the rise of dadaism, impressionism, and cubism around the turn of the last century, with their aesthetics of defocusing, fragmentation of perception, and conspicuous formalisms. The coming of existentialism in both its philosophical and aesthetic manifestations, producing both a nagging nihilism and a robust phenomenology, is another intellectual progenitor of postmodernism. The personalist poetry of the mid-19th century, the postmodernist architecture so typical of mega-shopping malls, and the emphasis on humanistic psychology and qualitative sociology in the 1960s are materializations of inquiries preceding and following upon existential thought in the academy.

Most--and arguably all--of these inquiries came as responses to a totalizing vision in some intellectual arena. Romanticism followed upon the heels of a scientistically intoned neoclassicism; the inward journey of such personalist poets as Gerard Manley Hopkins seems in part a reaction to the celebratory technodiscourses of the Industrial Revolution; the turn-of-the-century art movements attacked naturalism and mythic monumentalism; existentialism responded to the positivistic philosophies and sciences of its day; and postmodernism, in the hands especially of Lyotard, is what Fredric Jameson in his foreword to the book calls a paralogism, that is, a method for undermining or destabilizing the discourses of normal science, high modernist aesthetics, and universalist political or historical teleologies.

Jameson certainly sees Lyotard's master work as a discursive, even rhetorical activity. He's not at all convinced that Lyotard is actually articulating a postmodern condition or stage in human development; rather, he sees in Lyotard a line of critique that represents less a new epistemology, that is, a new way of knowing and acting, than a new ethic: a new language game, in Lyotard's phrase. The language game of denotation, the basis of scientific knowledge, argues Lyotard, must be replaced by the language game of narrative, the basis of humanly interested knowledge. Of particular interest to Lyotard is narrative knowledge with political implications.

It is for this reason, despite his citation of Baudrillard, that I see more basic connections between McGee and Lyotard. McGee's work is less like Baudrillard's, with its emphasis on the specular play of signs (as in In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities), electronic encephalization (as in The Ecstasy of Communication), or rhetorical manipulation understood as "a floating causality where positivity and negativity engender and overlap with one another, where there is no longer any active or passive" (as in Simulations). McGee's work is more like Lyotard's, less interested in the metaphysics of the human condition and more interested in the political delegitimation of cultural institutions and the destabilization of knowledge regimes. For me, McGee's version of postmodern critique, especially in the Internet discourses he proffers on the listservs Comgrads and Crtnet, are the political acts of a post-1960s academic who engages in what Douglas Kellner talks about as "theory wars":

The past decades of intense cultural, social, and political struggle since the 1960s also saw the rise of many new theories and approaches to culture and society. It is as if the tumultuous struggles of the era sought expression and replication in the realm of theory. The political passions and energies seemed to be sublimated into the discourse of theory and new theories were appropriated with the intensity that marked the assimilation and dissemination of radical political ideas and practices in the 1960s. The proliferation of new theoretical discourses first took the form of theory fever, in which each new, or newly discovered, theoretical discourse produced feverish excitement, as if a new theory virus totally took over and possessed its host. Then the proliferating theory fever took on the form of theory wars between the competing theoretical discourses, often reducing theory to the domain of fashion.
The theory wars that Kellner then discusses at greater length have produced a discursive politics—a series of rhetorics, rhetorics of race/class/gender, of critical and post-Marxism, of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, of critical social theory and dialectics, of British Cultural Studies and transdisciplinary cultural studies, and, yes, of postmodernity.

What I am driving at is actually a dual hypothesis here: that talk of the postmodern condition is but the latest in a series of despairing and rebutting discourses of the last hundred and fifty years, yet that it is talk derived from and appropriate to its more particular historical contexts.

**The Rhetorics of Delegitimation and Destabilization**

This brings me to my final argument: that the emptiness and despair I note in my title is descriptive, not judgmental—indicative, more particularly, of the presence in our time of a rhetorical practice (one might call it a genre) or set of practices that come to stir the epistemological, social, and political pots of the collectivity. The ancient Greeks had to deal with the relativism of Protagoras, the sophistic nihilism and emotional flights of Gorgias, the meta-phenomenalism or idealism of Plato, and dogged cynicism of Diogenes. Similarly, the western world of this century has had to contend with a series of posts--postpositivism, post-industrialism, poststructuralism, post-fordism, post-feminism, postmodernism. These and most of the other posts of our age form a conceptual fence seeking to surround, isolate, and then destroy practices variously identified as modernism, Enlightenment rationality, universalism and other epistemologies of the totality, and widely shared technologies especially of destruction, reconstruction, and communication.

If I dare reach for an essentializing, totalizing concept, I would say that for all of individual differences that can be seen when one compares a 19th-century Luddite with a 20th-century Earth First! activist, or one Frenchman such as Jean-Paul Sartre with another such as Jean Baudrillard, in fact their discourses have affinities. Those affinities may not be strong enough to produce what we quaintly identified as a genre a quarter-century ago, but they do seem to belong to a realm or sphere or arena or constellation.

Postmodern critique, like so many of its predecessors in my lifetime, seems to many to be destructive, to be cynical in a technical sense—a discourse, as Jeffrey Goldfarb has argued, seeking to legitimate disbelief. [19] Striking with Lyotard at normal science, with Theodore Roszak at "data glut" and "the culture of information," [20] with Bruno Latour at the political-economic bases of the knowledge industry, [21] or with Noam Chomsky at the governmental-industrial conspiracy to create a totalizing "spectator democracy" in our time, [22] one joins an army of disbelievers. Disbelief, for most preachers of the posts, however, is but preparatory to the acquisition of new beliefs. That is, central to most of the anti-science, anti-rationality, and anti-ideology centered movements are projects of social and political recovery, reaffirmation, or redirection.

And so, the followers of General Ludd sought to restore the workers' voice in the operation of the clothing factories of northwest England by smashing power looms. The personalist poets wanted to recenter human thought on interiority rather than exteriority. The philosophers of everyday life such as Michel deCerteau want to intensely interrogate subjectivity and not just demonize the objectivations within which we encounter ourselves. [23] So, too, with postmodern philosophers such as Lyotard; he finishes his book on the postmodern condition by specifying a series of social-political reforms: renunciation of the terrorist use of language games, a preference for local rather than large-scale decision making, the continuing celebration of paralogy or destabilization to keep social systems alive, and finally a society where the ideal of consensus is replaced by the ideal of justice. In Barbara Biesecker's recent book on Burke and postmodernity, it is clear that she, too, sees in postmodern discourse an affirmation, not of the "Idea of Nothing" but rather the "Idea of No"--the centrality of the negative, which for Biesecker produces "our willingness to rhetorically transform ourselves in the mirror of politics by actively choosing to become its new subjects." [24] To Burke and to Biesecker, the linguistic negative reaffirms rhetorical force and effect.
The genre or realm of political discourse I am discussing, therefore, is strongly reformatory or revolutionary. Therein lies its strong sense of rhetorical efficacy and agency: performed public language is clearly presumed to make important differences in life, even among practitioners of the rhetoric of delegitimation and destabilization. Whether through the historical doxa that Aristotle posited as the engines of social action in premodern rhetoric, the scientistically colored demonstrations that Locke claimed were the essence of proof in modern rhetoric, or Lyotard's language games whereby we entice and identify with each other in postmodern discourses, the efficacy of rhetorical agents keeps the bête noir at bay.

The Stakes

Undoubtedly, what I've been arguing is incomplete, too grandiose to be developed in anything less than a book, probably picky, and possibly just plain naive. With David Descutner and DeLysa Burnier before me, with Robert Wess and Barbara Biesecker as my Burkean companions, and with Douglas Kellner as my favorite guide through the trenches of the theory wars, I seek to understand the politically driven social epistemologies of my time. The issues at stake for me are varied: everything from an anxious hope that normal science still is normal enough to guarantee that my pharmacist won't poison me when molding pills, to the desire to recoup enough rationality to sustain a healthy, accountable doctoral program, and on to the determination to save my job as rhetorician by reading the French epistemologists more for amusement than intellectual guidance. [25]

Notes


[15] Lyotard, sec. 7-8 (pp. 23-31).

[16] Lyotard argues that narrative knowledge comes in two forms, one political (which delegitimates grand narratives and destabilizes normal science) and one philosophical (which tends to celebrate the totalizing and universalizing dimensions of life's lessons). Philosophical narrative knowledge to Lyotard is unremittingly Germanic--certainly non-French. See sec. 9 (pp. 31-37).


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