

## **From Romantic to Modernist to Postmodern Self**

Until the late seventeenth century, Kenneth Gergen argues, people defined themselves primarily in terms of group membership (e.g., religion, class, profession) rather than in terms of their own unique characteristics. During this time, people thought of themselves in the language of passion, purpose, and personal significance, and thus the notion of romantic self emerged. In this romantic perspective of self, the individual's true essence was thought to be hidden deep within the recesses of the soul (e.g., "I feel something genuine about her very deep in my heart").

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, this romantic self began to give its way to the understandable, logical entity. The observable aspects of being a human came to the foreground (e.g., efforts to learn about human cognitions through science). The power of progress (e.g., Enlightenment) was applied to an individual's own future, with psychology promising to unlock the secrets of learning, development, and interpersonal functioning. Gergen suggests that these two historical trends have blended and now most individuals in contemporary Western culture understand themselves through a combined romantic-modernist lens.

Meanwhile, Gergen further argues that today's rapidly expanding array of "high" technologies, such as laptop computers, VCRs (VCRs may no longer be perceived as a high technology by today's standard but Gergen was making this claim in 1991 and using examples of that time period), jets, FAX machines, and cellular phones, puts individuals in frequent and close contact with a wide spectrum of people and institutions. In his view, the effect of this social saturation enabled by communication technologies is a profound change in the way we understand ourselves and others. In other words, communication technologies evoke the development of sense of self populated and saturated with experiences from his or her social relations (e.g., me having a reader-author relationship with Gergen and now understanding the

notion of self through his point of view, me having met people and made friends from Korea, Chicago, and from a trip to Montreal, etc. while my grandmother knew only the people in her immediate neighborhoods when growing up) with each suited to a particular form of communication or cultural context, and collectively leading to the abandonment of the reliably familiar individual in favor of life in both temporal and permanent flow of relationships, which Gergen sees as postmodern self. In the following, I will discuss various discussions about postmodernity that has allowed emergence and development of postmodern self.

### **Postmodern Condition and Its Manifestations**

Postmodernity has been interpreted and theorized in diverse ways. First, Jean-Francois Lyotard describes shifts in conditions of knowledge at the turn of modern era. He argues that “grand narratives” (or “meta-narratives”) which are large-scale theories and philosophies of the world, such as the progress of history, the belief that we can know everything by science, and the possibility of absolute freedom, have been challenged. People have ceased to believe that the narratives of this kind are adequate to explain and represent the current status of the world. Such condition of resistance and doubt is, in Lyotard’s definition, postmodern, which replaces meta-narratives with small, local, multiple narratives.

For Fredric Jameson, postmodernism is a type of cultural form appropriate to the contemporary state of global capitalism. He claims that postmodernism is differentiated from other cultural forms by its emphasis on fragmentation. Fragmentation of the subject replaces the alienation of the subject which characterized modernism. Postmodernism is concerned with all surface, but no substance. There is a loss of the center and postmodern culture manifests the emergence of a new kind of superficiality and depthlessness. Existentially, he identifies the

waning of affect within fragmented postmodern selves devoid of the expressive energies characteristic of modernism. Such one-dimensional postmodern texts and selves challenge the continued relevance of hermeneutic depth models such as, he lists, the semiotic model of signifier and signified.

Meanwhile, Jean Baudrillard argues that postmodernity is an era organized around simulations (e.g., images, models, virtual reality) while modernity was an era of history organized around production. In his view, the relationship implicit in the modernist idea of an original and a copy becomes disrupted in a postmodern era where referents and signifiers are no longer logically linked; instead, duplications represent the real in the postmodern world.

The concept that Baudrillard uses to illustrate this phenomenon is simulacrum, or a copy without the original. He uses Disneyland as an example of simulacrum, which he discusses as a simulation of an idealized America. Disneyland provides a hyperreal (“more real” than any original could be) model of the U.S., generating characters, ideals, and images of a perfect world. Disneyland is also, in Baudrillard view, a replica of a fantasy that serves to deflect attention from the Disney-like characteristic of America. (In other words, Disneyland itself sets up a distinction between a simulation and the original.) Similarly, he contends that the Watergate scandal, which in his view was not a scandal but rather a normal outcome of the monstrous unprincipled enterprise of contemporary American politics, serves to draw attention away from the fact that American political life is itself corrupt to the core and that Watergate is not an exception but the rule.

This simulation also comes to structure and constitute everyday life and it itself becomes a reality of its own existence, Baudrillard argues, so that, for instance, women undergo extensive cosmetic surgery to emulate the air-brushed and digitally manipulated models in the pages of

magazines. If we extend this to media (newspapers, television, radio, etc.), then for Baudrillard, media portrayals of the world are driven not by the way as the world “really is”, but by the steadily emerging histories of portrayal itself. As these histories unfold, each new lamination is influenced by the preceding, accounts are layered upon accounts, and reality is transformed into a hyperreality. Baudrillard contends that then, this is a world in which power is not ideological but rather simulated, created through signs and models. It is a world in which there is no subject but rather a vortex of simulation created by constant implosions of images, information, and messages.

Henry Jenkins approaches to postmodernism from perspectives of fandom. In his study of fan films in the digital age, Jenkins illustrates the creative aesthetic potential in the parodic, fantastic, and erotic reworkings of mainstream commercial products such as the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* films and spin-offs. Jenkins contends that the proliferation of amateur cultural artifacts (e.g., alternative, parallel stories) created by fans of the mainstream texts through media technologies such as camcorders, digital editing, and internet is part of grassroots dialogues with mass media culture. These media technologies that allow fans to make their own alternative stories shift the terrain of media culture to include an array of narratives and images, of which many appropriate and transform the iconography of the commercial. In Jenkins’s view, this has allowed a populist participatory culture that speaks back to the hegemonic restrictions brought by convergence and consolidated ownership of the media industry.

Meanwhile, other scholars and theorists have tried to appropriate postmodernism for a more activist theory. For instance, Angela McRobbie theorizes postmodernism for feminism, arguing that postmodern discourses challenge the notions of the “real me”, essentialist notions of the self that suggest that there is a natural, unified, and hidden essence to the self that we could

discover and understand (modernist self in Gergen's term). In her view, such postmodern discourses can help women to question the normative models of femininity and masculinity.

She lays out three possible approaches to postmodernism in today's conjuncture, which are: 1) those who simply affirm and celebrate postmodernism; 2) those who completely reject it; and 3) those who try to avoid the excesses of a completely affirmative and highly rhetorical postmodernism for a remorseless critique of modernity combined with a looking to those accounts of postmodernity as a way of finding a place from which to speak and a space from which to develop that critique of the places and the spaces of exclusion inside modernity.

Assessing the third approach as healthy, McRobbie cites Stuart Hall as a positive example of a productive appropriation of postmodernism and interprets postmodernism for a feminist cause.

Balancing between the two extreme views of postmodernism, she emphasizes Hall's positioning of himself on the other side of modernity. From this perspective, the postmodern turn validates the discourses of those marginalized or oppressed within modern societies to speak and articulate experiences, positions, and perspectives suppressed in the canonical culture and master theories of the modern era.

### **Postmodern, Multiple, Fluid Self**

Postmodern condition and its manifestations described above have allowed the emergence of postmodern self, in particular multiple/fluid self and saturated self that Sherry Turkle and Kenneth Gergen discuss.

Mark Poster and Sherry Turkle were scholars who explicitly discussed the intersection between identity and computer technologies, more precisely internet technologies, from postmodern perspectives. To Poster, proliferation of information and communications are novel

environments that create new realms of experience such as virtual realities and innovative forms of communication and subjectivity. Turkle, through her empirical study of MUD/MOO (text-based internet communication interface and environment that were popular at the time of Turkle's study in the early 1990s) users, provides more concrete examples and arguments that amend Poster's claim that novel forms of cultural identity and experience are emerging in the virtual communities and cyberspaces. Her main thesis in the book "Life on the Screen" is that by participating in gender-crossing, role plays, romance, and identity crisis online (as well as offline with their new experience acquired from online), people develop a sense of multiple self and fluid self, in which they travel through and make sense of all these new identities. Also internet users become intimate with their machine (that is computer in her study) and these new relations based upon technology force us to consider to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs (initially brought forth to discourse by Donna Haraway), transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code. To Turkle, this notion of self, highlighted by internet technologies, is postmodern.

In comparison to Turkle, what characterizes postmodern self most in Gergen's view is the saturation in people's relations through communication technologies. Gergen describes an array of development of communication technologies and the resulting social saturation and populated self. In this world, other people enter our lives and ultimately our selves through a wide variety of compelling forms, including face-to-face interactions, email, and the dramatic performances of media celebrities such as soap opera stars. Whereas relationships previously were limited to a small circle of significant others (because that's how far generally people could travel to upon technologies and social structures available at that time), they now have expanded into a wider

sphere of divergent interactions. Gergen argues that these myriad voices echo within the self, resulting in a multiplicity of understandings and associated self-investments in the world.

### **Challenges to Postmodern Self**

Some postmodern theorists' initial enthusiastic perspectives of postmodern self with optimism have met some criticism recently, in particular since the mid 1990s. Critical cyberculture studies scholars began to oppose technological determinism in many variants of postmodern theory where Poster, for instance, dismisses political economy and is overly determinist in descriptions of the forms of subjectivity and culture that the new technologies are producing. In another example, in Baudrillard's view of postmodernism, we are thrown into a novel world of simulation and hyperreality where the modern subject dissolves and implodes in a precession of simulacra. In both scholars' arguments, there is a covert determinism in assuming that new media automatically generate new subjectivities and identities.

Also some critics have been skeptical of the notion of fluid self and resisted the claims concerning the emancipatory or novel features of new media. They contrasted the ways that capitalism is colonizing and controlling new media and argued how they are now new sources of profitability, domination, and social control. In particular, for instance, from postcolonial theory perspectives, Lisa Nakamura heavily critiques Turkle's notion of fluid self which implies, and Turkle specifically argued, that it allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity upon online role play and makes it easier to accept the array of our and others' inconsistent personae. Nakamura discusses the phenomenon of racial passing where often times either race is completely erased within white normalcy (e.g., race being assumed to be white by default and only marked when not white) or exoticized in stereotypes, and notes that internet technologies

further marginalize racial minorities. In addition, in the book chapter “Cybertyping and the Work of Race in the Age of Digital Reproduction”, Nakamura looks at how race gets coded in physical world for different kinds of work in the IT industry. Nakamura makes the argument that while foreign minorities, such as Asians, get glorified as “model minorities,” domestic minorities, like African Americans, are cast as digital outsiders. Moore also points out that identity is not merely a self-invention as echoed in Turkle’s argument but that narratives and performances of self will always have to draw on existing symbolic resources and cultural conventions.

On the other hand, Gergen seems more careful than Turkle in terms of assessment of the current postmodern status of self within inevitable environments of multiple perspectives and diverse realities. To Gergen, saturated self provides both problems and possibilities. He addresses various disconcerting effects of the postmodern self on intimacy, commitment, and family life, followed by a discussion of its liberating benefits. He entertains the possibility of collectively holding on to our traditional romantic-modernist sense of self in the midst of current cultural and technological changes. Gergen also contends that it is the technology of social saturation and the shift toward postmodern existence, on which global well-being will depend. He notes that differences in perspective frequently lead to deadly exchanges, as it does between Irish Catholics and Protestants, South African White supremacists and Black nationalists, and Israelis and Palestinians. For example, he suggests that postmodern perspectives should foster increased focus on joint participation and public dialogue among people with diverse perspectives and fewer attempts to justify and defend particular definition of universal, transcendent truth.