

POSTMODERNISM

For Rationalists

rwu.io

Before we start, a disclaimer:

This presentation is a highly reductive simplification of incredibly complex topics. You will not “get” what postmodernism is after one short presentation any more than a beginner physics student would “get” how magnets work after learning they produce such a thing as a “magnetic field”.

Broad and sweeping (read: inaccurate) generalizations will necessarily be made in the interest of capturing the spirit of the phenomenon, which is the most I can hope to accomplish here. (No guarantees!)

Without further ado...

Postmodernism is...

- A badly misinterpreted term with a lot of baggage
- Can't be tabooed because none of its elements are sufficiently synonymous with the gestalt
- Kind of like a conglomerate corporation
 - Is Amazon a... Bookstore? Cloud computing provider? Organic grocery chain? Liberal-leaning newspaper? Movie rating website? Game streaming service?
- Reducible, but unsatisfactorily
 - Amazon is a Seattle-based public corporation helmed by Jeff Bezos, trading under the ticker AMZN
 - The definition fits, but doesn't really tell you anything
 - "But that's still informative to someone who has no idea what Amazon is" – True, so...
 - Postmodernism is a post-WWII collection of reactionary movements in art, architecture, literature, and philosophy to the totality of prior approaches in each discipline.

Postmodern Architecture

- 1960s. Postmodern architecture was a *reply* to the prevailing standards of Modernist architecture (late 19th -> WWII)



Bauhaus

- *Functional, not ornamental*
- *Simple geometries*
- *Glass, steel, concrete*
- *Clean angles*



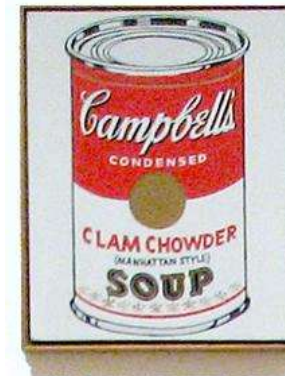
Postmodern

- *Return to ornament*
- *Stylistic fusion (ex. Bauhaus + Classical)*
- *Formal fluidity*
- *Material fluidity*

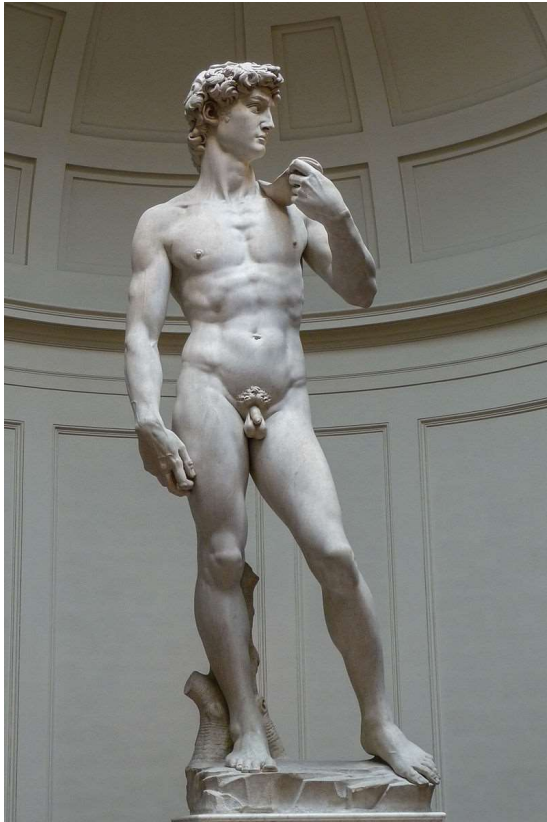
Postmodern Art



	Renaissance	Postmodern
Art is...	Enduring Representational Transcendental	Temporal Arbitrary Transient
Form is...	Painting Sculpture	WHATEVER YOU WANT IT TO BE
Meaning is...	Objective Fixed Determined	Subjective Constructed WHATEVER YOU WANT IT TO BE



Postmodern Art Continued



“I am Ozymandias, King of Kings”

-VS-



“Maybe we can be famous for 15 minutes!”

Postmodern Lit

Hyperconscious of its own process of production

Roland Barthes: “Death of the Author”

- Authorial Intent is a “phlogiston”; meaning is constructed by the *reader* who comes to the text with his own set of assumptions and experiences, thus is necessarily individual (never fixed, unchanging, universal)

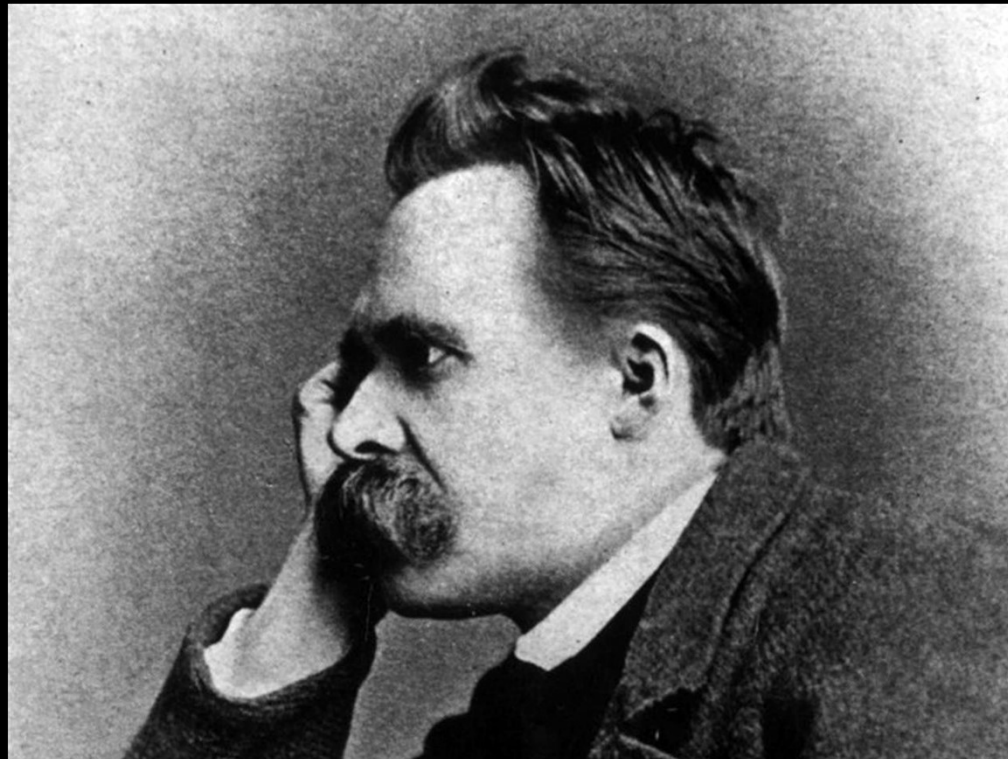


GRANT SNIDER

Postmodern Era

- 1950 onwards, also known as **postmodernity**
 - Coined by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979)
- Post-Enlightenment modern era, **modernity**, defined by:
 - Grand narratives, widespread belief in historical progress
 - Science getting better at figuring out how things work + industrialization = decreasing religiosity, increasing secularism leads to...
 - Increasing belief in power of human mind & rational control to solve society's problems
 - Totalitarian bureaucratic control – Stalin
 - Hillary Clinton, the last Modern candidate: “If only everyone knew the *facts*, then we could fix the world. And *the facts* say I should be President!”
 - Rationality (via Yudkowsky) is quintessentially Modern
- We all live in the **postmodern era**
 - Decentralized; political struggle of competing narratives
 - Who gets to write history? What *is* history?
 - What are facts? What is truth?

Nietzsche



“God is **dead**”

...But what is “God”?

- NOT a big invisible man in the sky deciding the fate of the universe forever
- Only literalists / fundamentalists still believe this
- Theologians began discarding literalism in the 1600s
 - Vast majority of Christians today read Bible allegorically / metaphorically
- New Atheists = Beating dead horses & straw men
 - Popular with teenagers who take things literally / are trained to do so in their science classes. “I’m an atheist” = Easy way to build identity / boost ego; arguments readily supplied; teens just need to memorize them

God is...

- A functional meme whose effects (have) include(d):
 - Community, in-group, lingua franca (churches)
 - Ethical norms (ten commandments, life of Jesus)
 - Genocide and oppression (crusades, evangelism)
- Atheists can adopt the Christian ethic without belief in God
 - But atheism as an ideology/identity lacks in-group cohesion, group norms, rituals – so they must find other avenues to fulfill said lack

God is...

- A meme, which has functional effects (see previous slide)
- A meme which is “more real” in a sense than memes with less virality e.g. Amaterasu, Flying Spaghetti Monster
- Even as a meme, does not exist as a “thing-in-itself”
 - Everyone’s idea of God is a little different from everyone else’s
 - **Yet the emergent structure of everyone’s idea nevertheless bears resemblance to each individual’s idea**
- An egregore, a la Scott Alexander’s Moloch

God is...



-NOT-



God is dead?

- When western religiosity declines, you get:
 - Lack of ethics = nihilism
 - Building your own ethical system from scratch is an alternative but for most people monumentally difficult
 - Community, in-group, sense of solidarity dissolves
 - Atomized state = loneliness = no bonds = bad for your (mental, social, economic, physical) health
 - Schizophrenia = sense of split self / lack of unity, leads to “Who am I even?”
 - Narcissism = so like, I need an identity, and hey these corporate advertisements sell me values (always *ersatz*, i.e. worse substitute) so I will spend spend spend so I can *seem like someone*
 - LOOK AT ME I LOVE POKEMON WHAT ABOUT ME I LIKE MINIONS!!! I’M SO GUCCI, HAVE IT YOUR WAY BURGER KING... I’M INTERESTING, I DRINK DOS EQUIS

Is God dead?

- If so, something must fill its void; nature abhors a vacuum
 - Moloch?
- Scott's Moloch and the Biblical God are the same at the level of *epistemology*, different at the levels of *epidemiology* and *pragmatics*
- So what is the Deity of Postmodernity?
With regards to its functional effects, it is...

...This.



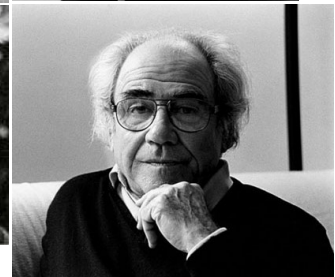
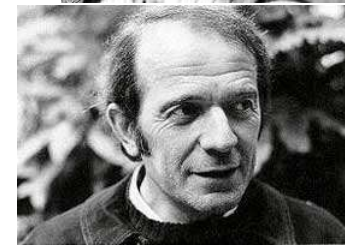
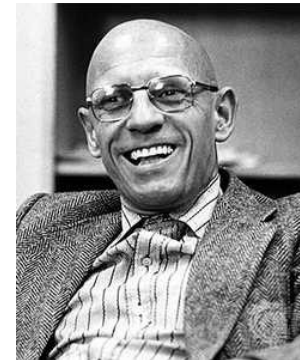
How does this relate to postmodernism?

- Lyotard: The postmodern era (postmodernity) is characterized by *lack of grand narratives*
- God (& religiosity) = dead grand narrative
- Germany, Japan, Hitler are evil = dead grand narrative
- We're going to put a man on the moon = dead grand narrative
- JFK = symbolic god of modernism; assassination = death of god redux;
 - AMERICAN DREAM = DEAD GRAND NARRATIVE

- No universal values except...
- **MONEY | CAPITAL | \$\$\$**
 - New lowest common denominator & lingua franca
- "GREED IS GOOD" – GORDON GEKKO

For our new world we need... NEW THEORY

- Foucault = Nietzschean genealogist
 - What is “power”, how does it operate, any fundamental principles?
 - What are the historical origins of institutional power?
 - Concepts of *episteme* & *discourse* = postmodern epistemology
- Derrida = We’re haunted by ghosts (egregores)
 - Who / what is haunting us?
 - We must **deconstruct** to figure out, then exorcise or reincarnate
 - See also: Carl Jung’s collective unconscious
- Deleuze = basically Heraclitus on LSD
 - go with the flow baby
 - RHIZOMES BABY
 - All about that PROCESS
- Baudrillard = our world is the matrix, except taking the red pill doesn’t get you out of it, just lets you realize you are in the matrix & can’t escape or ever forget **LOL**
 - History has become reified images without referent; Disneyland is, in a sense, the most *real*



Is “new theory” post-hoc rationalization?

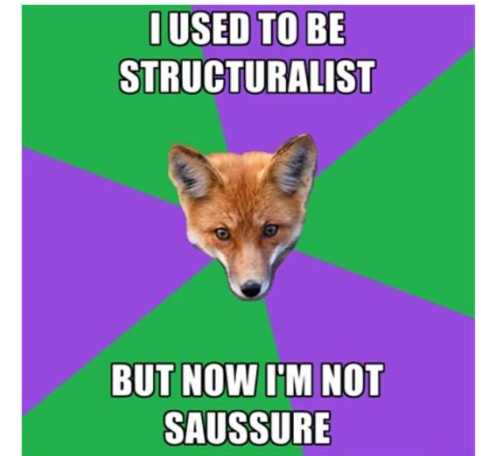
- Maybe
- Probably
- But we need to describe and interpret what happens to us
- Trying to apply old models of interpretation to contemporary existence is irrelevant, anachronistic
 - Plato’s theory of ideals?
 - Hobbes and his leviathan?
 - Smith’s invisible hand?
 - How do any of these help explain how/why hundreds of thousands of otherwise normal German civilians helped perpetuate Holocaust atrocities?
 - Here’s Hannah Arendt with the *banality of evil!*
 - Accurate, cutting descriptive model which can be transposed onto other sociological phenomena
 - Arendt was not pomo but I’m using this just as a clear example for why new theory is necessary

Postmodern... Philosophy?

- Postmodernism **is not a philosophy**
- Structuralist & poststructuralist philosophers hated being called “postmodern” in the same way rationalists hate rationality being called a cult
- But they all came of age (intellectually) during *postmodernity*
- So we call them postmodern because...
 - It’s easy
 - Everyone knows what everyone else means

Postmodern Philosophy

- This is not a course in the history of philosophy, I will not be tracing the intellectual lineage of Structuralism and its diaspora
 - Just know that **Jacques Derrida** completely [dynamited it](#) at Johns Hopkins in 1966
- Instead I will be presenting what I consider to be some *interesting conclusions* from various postmodern theorists, phrased in ordinary (by rationalist standards) language
- But first, a commentary on the postmodern conception of knowledge



Postmodern Epistemology

Epistemology = Theory of knowledge; “What is truth?”

Empiricism = Truth is OBSERVABLE & TESTABLE

Rationalism = Truth is MENTALLY DEDUCIBLE

“Woo” = Truth is ASTROLOGY & HOROSCOPES

Christianity = Truth is GOD

Pomo = Truth is WHATEVER YOU WANT IT TO BE

Postmodern... Meta-Epistemology.

Pomo = Truth is:

- DEPENDENT ON CONTEXT, FRAME OF REFERENCE (or: language game)
- SUBJECTIVE AND RELATIVE
- Thus: WHATEVER YOU WANT IT TO BE

[Richard Feynman gets it.](#)

(1:38-1:45)

Be like Feynman!

This **does not** mean actions don't have consequences. For example...

Morality is relative. Is killing bad? Not *inherently* or *necessarily*.

But if you kill someone, you'll go to jail – this is a fact. You can *call this* bad *if you want*.

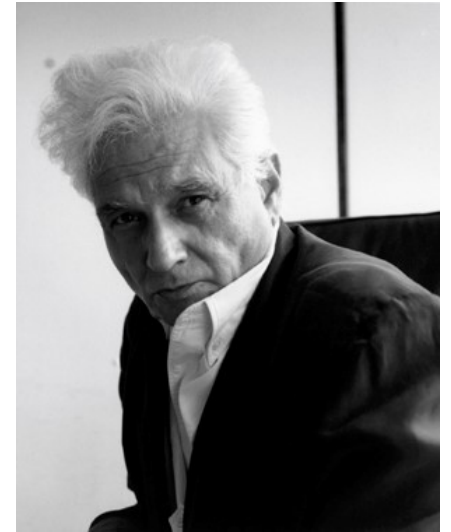
See also: trolley problem; agent that defines “good” as “most casualties” will do MULTI-TRACK DRIFTING

Use rhetoric to determine truth:

- Fake news
- Alternative facts
- (Some) Trump supporters GROK Kellyanne Conway with equal or GREATER INTENSITY to your grokking Bayes or the dragon eating villagers fable
 - “But *grok* can only be used for a deep understanding of something that corresponds to REALITY, to THE TRUTH”
 - Point: currently enjoying its loud *woosh* over your scalp

Deconstruction – In action

- Rationalists do this all the time
 - Find exceptions to rules and generalized statements
- “But if you kill someone, you’ll go to jail – this is a fact.”
 - It is a fact *given that*:
 - You are in the U.S.
 - You had malicious intent
 - The law exists
 - Killing w/malicious intent is wrong according to the law
 - Police have the power and legal right to enforce the law
 - Police exist
 - Jails exist
 - You were caught
 - You don’t have the resources or connections to get out of your conviction
 - Etc. (I could go on forever with more conditionals)



Deconstruction – What is it?

- Deconstruction (as an activity) approximates to: uncovering the assumptions, conditionals, presuppositions, *a priori* givens which enable the possibility of **text**
 - **Text** is not just a book, novel, journal, written word
 - *Everything* is a text; *everything* can be conceived of as textual, a text for interpretation
 - Hermeneutics = philosophy of interpretation; of making meaning out of things
 - Deconstruction ≈ deciphering hermeneutic frames
 - Finding exceptions to rules and generalized statements = *one of several* deconstructive techniques
 - (also: puns)

- “Psychology research study indicates X.”

- It is a fact *given that*:
 - You are Western
 - You are Educated
 - You are Industrialized
 - You are Rich
 - You are Democratic
 - Etc.

- “Mao Zedong was a great leader who modernized China.”

It is a fact *given that*:

- You grew up in China from the 70s on
 - You were taught history in class
 - The CPC sanctions what narratives get taught in history classes
- Etc.

Hermeneutic exercise: Language of ethics

- Virtue Ethics (VE)
- Deontology (D)
- Utilitarianism (U)

- CAN BE DEFINED IN TERMS OF ONE ANOTHER
 - U as VE: It is virtuous to donate money to charity effectively
 - U as D: One *should always* adopt utilitarianism
 - [VE/D] as U: Adopting an ethic of [compassion and forgiveness]/[never lying] leads to the most utilons and QALYs

- Language is FREE PLAY in mindspace, NOT externally referent
 - But we can (functionally/pragmatically) *pretend* it is externally referent, just like we can (functionally/pragmatically) *pretend* like we have free will

So what?

Aren't we just playing with words? Why does any of this *matter*?

- MARX: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”

What he missed:

- Our mental models [interpretations, frameworks] AFFECT OUR ACTIONS AND BEHAVIOR
 - Thus CHANGE THE WORLD

Deconstruction now

- Can, but SHOULD NOT be used to arbitrarily destroy functional frameworks
See: Chesterton's Fence
- Truly sad how an otherwise-revolutionary philosophy has been *weaponized*
 - Campus SJWs, Alt-Right *weaponize* philosophy (pomo theory)
Just like politicians *weaponize* physics (nuclear weapons)
- Do these people have any understanding of [philosophy, physics]?
 - No
- Which is why philosophy writ large is important: So you see the trees **and the forest** ***and the environmental conditions enabling the possibility of their existence***

Why are rationalists interested in philosophy?

- Intelligence signaling
- Truth is a core rationalist value
 - “God does not exist”
 - “Our brains are biased AF”
 - “Everything is probability”
- Truth is a core value in philosophy
 - “We need to figure this out”
 - “What is the case? What is not the case?”
 - Two popular versions:
 - Analytic philosophers: Truth is... LOGIC
 - Continental philosophers: Truth is... LANGUAGE
 - ...But logic is reducible to language and vice versa

You say: Logic is NOT reducible to language

- “Even without humans, the universe still exists”
- But existence is a human concept
- Requires an observer to *make sense* of it
- Logic is a concept
 - Logic exists in the same way the moon/stars/galaxies exist – as a human mental model
 - Mental models are dependent on language (read: some sort of symbolic representation)
- “Aliens might use different symbols but they’d discover the same laws”
 - Would they? Assuming their perceptual apparatus is the same, maybe.
- Even if I grant you logic exists without humans, it only holds in our *observable universe*
 - “False, it holds in *all possible universes*”
 - Can you prove that – do you *grok* that – or are you just parroting a meme?
 - “Well, if you accept that...” | Stop there.
- **Without subjects, there are no concepts**
 - **There is no “is” or “is not”, “thing” or “no thing”**

Everything is:

- Atoms
- Strings
- Math
- Signaling
- Physical
- Perception
- Subjective
- Objective
- A Simulation
- God
- Probability
- Language
- Political
- Maya
- Memes
- Phlogiston

**WHATEVER YOU
WANT IT TO BE**

Is any of this falsifiable?

- Asking this question indicates you are stuck in empiricist epistemology, in the same way you might consider the faithful “stuck” in religion
- Is utilitarianism falsifiable?
 - **No**, but claims *within its framework* are
 - Falsifiability is built into its ethic
 - Popular with rationalists because of its scientific *aesthetic*
- Is Harry Potter falsifiable?
 - “Uh that’s a ridiculous question, it’s not claiming anything about reality”
 - Does not change the fact that reading it has changed millions of readers in profound ways
 - Can we test these “profound changes” with science? Maybe. But propose any realistic experiment and I’ll point out its findings are narrow in scope & heavily conditioned, thus at best trivially true.
- The humanities ask the ethical (how we should be)
- The sciences ask the physical (how physical world functions)
 - Social “science” is mostly bogus because it assumes human behavior can be predicted according to physical laws
 - Which might be true (probably is), but do I believe social scientists are even remotely close to figuring out how this works? LOL

Science

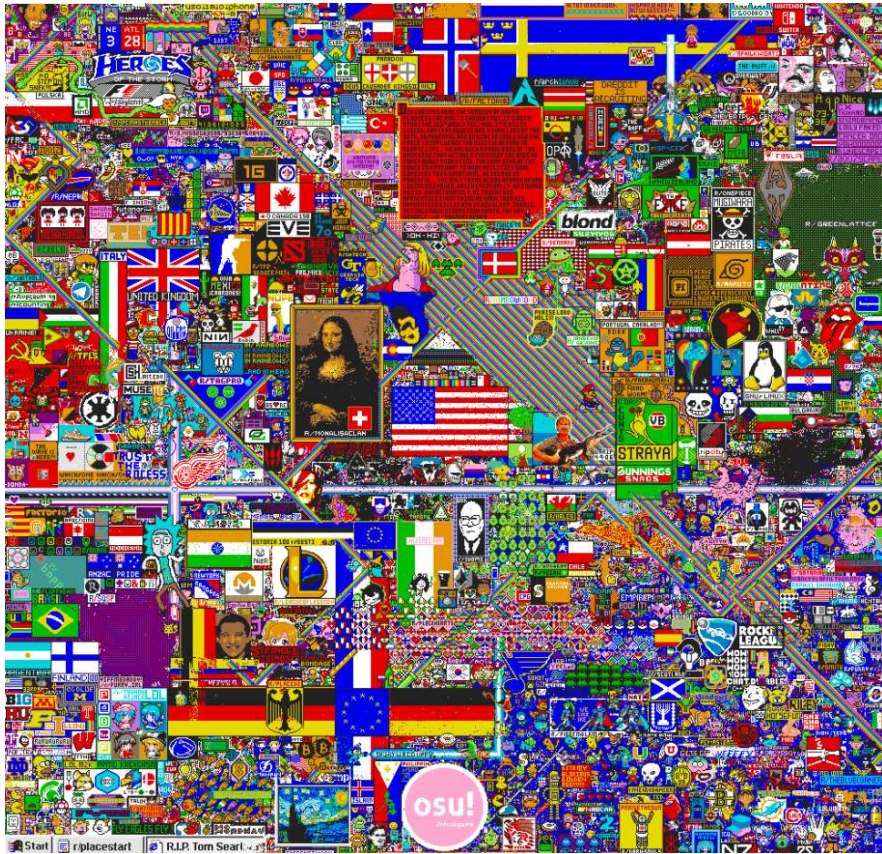
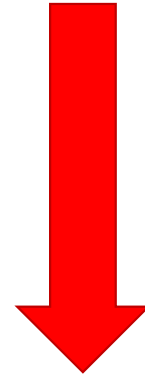
- Just another “truth”, equally “true” as new age spirituality.
 - This is a valid conclusion; all epistemology is equally valid.
 - This is also *functionally stupid* because...
- I like ERADICATING DISEASES
- I like STOPPING CHRONIC PAIN
- I like VACCINATIONS
- I like DEAF PEOPLE BEING ABLE TO HEAR AGAIN
- I like NUCLEAR ENERGY
- I like TERRAFORMING MARS
- I like REVERSING ENTROPY (ok maybe)

BUT REMEMBER:

- Research agendas are political; grant \$\$ ensures you work on someone else’s problems (you better learn to like what’s available OR you can serve coffee at sbux)
- Companies like Google and Microsoft have their own research labs, get to set their own agendas because they have \$\$\$
- Replication crisis LOL (and you thought Sokal was bad)



Politics



-NOT-



Additional evidence for Pomo ideas

- Identity is socially constructed – *Others in Mind*, Philippe Rochat (psychologist at Emory University)
- Physics research is political – *Disciplined Minds*, Jeff Schmidt (physics PhD, science writer)
- Language structures hermeneutics; language is arbitrary
 - *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff (linguist at UC Berkeley)

← Must read!

Golden Rule

- Old, bad: “Treat others how you want to be treated”
 - But what if they would treat themselves differently?
 - “I want a firm handshake. It signals confidence, honesty, accountability.”
 - “I want a bow. It’s polite and respectful.”
- New, better: Miller’s Law
 - **To understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true and try to imagine what it could be true of.**
 - Theory of mind taken to the logical extreme (read: radical, read: steelmanned)
 - Inhabit another’s epistemology in order to understand them & communicate
 - Deconstruction FREES YOU from rigidly constructed frameworks
- 🗨️ **FRESH, BEST** 🗨️: Synthesis of Golden Rule & Miller’s Law
 - I will treat others as I want to be treated, which is with a functional understanding of my and their cultural norms and preferences.
 - Alt: I will accept, not reduce, another’s aesthetics and understand that, *in general*, if they are interacting with me in a certain way, they likely prefer the same for themselves; that they are, *in general*, not deliberately trying to offend/anger me.
 - “Virtuous. Categorical. Utility maximizing. Rent this belief today for only \$3.99 a month!”

My boy Slavoj

- Lacan + Hegel + Marx
 - Uses Lacanian psychoanalytic framework to diagnose civilizational ills
 - Babbles a lot on YouTube
 - Zizek: “Coffee without cream is not the same as coffee without milk.”
 - You: “But both are just plain coffee? He seems like some kind of clown with no substance.”
- OR...**
- High inferential distance
 - Apply Miller’s Law
 - Which do you think is more likely



Summary

- Postmodernism at its **best**
 - Extrapolation of Nietzschean perspectivism
 - Liberating and freeing NOT dogmatic and ideological
 - Focuses on human values (broadly defined) over legible metrics
 - **Without** denying the importance and place of legible metrics
 - Tool for radical understanding of other subjects (subject = conscious human)
 - Tool for illuminating and overturning sociocultural injustice (broadly defined)
 - Allows you to understand the limitations of your (and any) worldview
 - Fits appropriate map(s) to territory, NOT territory to a single map, which will have a necessarily defined (read: constrained) cartographic method
- Postmodernism at its **worst**
 - Weaponized to push shoddy political agendas
 - Cargo cult ideology sold as shibboleth to malleable minds (undergrads)
 - Used to rationalize and excuse asocial behavior
 - Neoliberal “late stage capitalism” -> alienation, atomization, schizophrenia
 - Radical existential loneliness and nihilism

I am conflating definitions here, but that's part of my point: to illustrate different ways the same term “postmodernism” is used in contemporary discourse; to illustrate the importance of contextual hermeneutics.

Is Postmodernism Rational?

- Maybe. For our purposes, let's accept the broad definition that a thing is **rational** insofar as it helps you achieve your goals.
- If you:
 - Have goals of increasing your empathic, social, and ethical competence
 - Accept my charitable statements about “postmodernism at its best” from last slide
 - Enjoy the mental challenge of finding and piecing together abstract philosophical ideas
 - Then **yes**, I strongly believe you would benefit from engaging with postmodern theory
- If you:
 - Think everything I just said was a bunch of hogwash
 - Find the topics under discussion boring and tedious
 - Disagree with / do not accept my statements about postmodernism from last slide
 - Are satisfied with your current meta belief system and mental models
 - Then **no**, engaging with postmodern theory is likely not to be rational for you
- If you:
 - Found yourself hoping for a simple “yes” or “no”, then you may need to develop a better understanding of rationality before you consider engaging with postmodern theory.

Dark Arts

- “The term Dark Arts refers to rhetorical techniques crafted to exploit human cognitive biases in order to persuade, deceive, or otherwise manipulate a person into irrationally accepting beliefs perpetuated by the practitioner of the Arts. Use of the dark arts is especially common in sales and similar situations (known as hard sell in the sales business) and promotion of political and religious views.”
– LW Wiki
- But the dark arts are just arts if light can be shined on how they work
 - Empiricist epistemology (in its current state) is a weak light source
 - Postmodern theory is a strong light source
- Can be as rational as any non-dark art of rationality
- **Better:** “Cognitive bias is a much-maligned part of our biology; it exists for very good reasons. By definition, rhetoric exploits cognitive bias; if it didn’t, we couldn’t persuade or communicate. Its use and rationality are situationally dependent; what is (ir)rational for others is not for the rationalist to determine. Take a logos-based statistical approach at science conferences and a pathos-based emotional approach to raise funds for warm fuzzies projects. Rhetorical techniques are instruments which are not inherently ‘light’ or ‘dark’, ethical or unethical, but thinking makes them so.

Shoutout to Jonathan:

- “If mankind is not to destroy itself ... it must first of all attain to a hitherto altogether unprecedented knowledge of the preconditions of culture as a scientific standard for ecumenical goals. Herein lies the tremendous task for the great spirits of the coming century”
- Nietzsche

Further Reading

- Ludwig Wittgenstein – *Philosophical Investigations*
- Zhuangzi – *Zhuangzi*