

# **WRITING THE PAST**

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**MELISSA JULIET BENNETT**

**Student No: 308241576**

**Deconstructing Postmodernism in Historical Application:  
Contemplating the Future**

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The term 'postmodernism' brings about an air of controversy, particularly in those disciplines like science, religion and history, based on the idea of objectivity and single 'Truth'. Postmodernism has 'altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts' [1] but whether postmodern concepts can be applied to history is one of much debate.

Some historians believe postmodernism is a 'repudiation' of history in the name of 'liberation and creativity' leading to 'intellectual and moral suicide.' (Gertrude Himmelfarb [2]) Some say it has *murdered* history [3] and that it brings about 'nothing less than the definitive farewell... of all the essential aspirations which have dominated historiography as long as it has existed.' [4] Other historians have embraced postmodernism, believing that 'history can incorporate rather than repudiate postmodernist ideas and ideals.' [2]

This essay is a reflection on the perceived polarity of modern and postmodern theories in a historiographical context. Throwing a mirror at the 'mirror of mirrors', I deconstruct postmodernism itself, seeking to identify the theory's strengths and weaknesses in historical application. Considering the enormity of the topic I have concentrated on what I believe to be the most essential concepts and key problems. My discussion is not meant to be exhaustive, but explorative, in contemplation of what might come *after* post-modern.

Starting with an attempt to define postmodernism, I divide it into two broad categories: 'postmodernity', the period, and the 'postmodern condition', its associated ideas and theories. Following this clarification, I begin my discourse of the postmodern condition, discussing the theory's rejection of objectivity and scientism and its embracement of centrism, relativism, self-deconstruction and pluralism. I identify and address the major criticisms: nihilism, infinite pluralism, misuse, language games, hypocritical nature, and the need for structure, and universal truth.

Finally I look toward the future, identifying a possible synthesis of modern and postmodern theories. Placing modernism and postmodernism in collaboration rather than opposition, highlighting their potential to fill each other's gaps and provide solutions to each other's problems. The model I propose presents a 'modern' grand-narrative *as well as* a 'postmodern' stream of questioning and deconstruction. This unison of modern and postmodern, I believe, can maximize the accuracy of our understanding of the past.

### **Defining postmodernism**

Postmodernism is 'the rejection of the definitive' itself, with no single unified definition. For the sake of clarity and to avoid philosophical word games, I refer to recognised postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.' [5] In a un-postmodernistic fashion, but again for the sake of clarity, I classify postmodernism into two main categories, the period and the theory:

Postmodernity, the period, is said by some to have its origins in an architectural movement springing from Robert Venturi, Denis Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* published in 1972 [6], whilst others date it back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s [7]. Postmodernity is 'a period of the post-industrial, a new age of information, computers, mass media, mass communications.' [6] Its art and architecture has been characterized as pastiche, commodity fetishism, reprinted art, imitation of dead styles, loss of reality in images, pseudo-events and spectacles, and fundamental alterations in our experience of time. Postmodernity is a time 'post-war, post-holocaust, post-colonial, post-gender, post-history, and, most important for the cultural critic's enterprise, post-'master narrative' [8]

Postmodern theory, 'the postmodern condition' [5] or 'visions of postmodernity' [6] refers to the social, political and critical theories. These are the theories said to reject the 'secretly terroristic function' of meta-narratives 'to ground and legitimate the illusion of a "universal" human history.' [9] The rejection of ideology and theory is replaced in favour of a plurality of 'truths'.

The discourse that follows is focused on postmodern theory, with postmodernity discussed in relation to its contribution to the theory and analysing the contextual development of postmodern ideas.

### **Deconstructing postmodern theory**

“We need to interpret interpretations more than we need to interpret things.” Montaigne

Postmodern theory is itself an interpretation, requiring careful interpretation. This means we must deconstruct it, pulling it apart, analyzing concepts like ‘objectivity’, ‘scientism’, ‘centrism’, ‘pluralism’, ‘relativism’, ‘deconstruction’, ‘self-criticism’, and ‘nihilism’, in light of their context and appropriateness to history.

### **Rejecting objectivity and scientism**

Historical objectivity is not a single idea, but a sprawling set of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations and antipathies. [10] In his book *Postmodernism in History?* Southgate states that 'truth', 'fact' and 'objectivity' are 'at worst meaningless' and 'at best in the need of radical redefinition'. [2]

Confidence in ‘knowing’ the past with 'almost complete assurance' was enhanced with Darwin's 'model for universal emulation', coining the term ‘scientism.’ Scientism was intended to express the hope, or belief that the scope of science and the application of scientific methods could be indefinitely extended. Historians were expected to eliminate all traces of themselves, their own partialities and prejudices, their 'subjectivity', remaining detached from their objects of study and simply letting the evidence speak for itself. [2] This ideal depends on existence of this ‘true’ entity in the first place- a single past with complete evidence.

Does such an entity exist? Is it possible to ever completely removing ourselves from what we are doing? Postmodernity is not the first period in history for this question to be addressed. In 1933, a book called *Nature of History* was published in which the author H. Lambert says

The idea that even a simple narrative can be drawn up without bringing in any personal element is a delusion. Even description involves interpretation of what is seen or felt and our minds tend to rationalize a narrative by supplying not what we actually saw, but what

we are convinced we must have seen... History is not a science of observation at all - it is a science of reasoning. [11]

British philosopher Stephen Toulmin offers an even earlier history of these ideas. “The sixteenth-century followers of classical scepticism... [offered] a new way of understanding human life and motives: like Socrates long ago, and Wittgenstein in our own time, they taught readers to recognize how philosophical theories overreach the limits of human rationality” [12] The relationship between modern and postmodern is not so different from that of the Renaissance and modernity. ‘The Renaissance perspective which preceded the modern in fact echoes, in some ways the postmodern one which followed it – especially in its questioning the importance of logical analysis and universal meaning.’ [13]

Returning to more recent times, Michel Foucault tells of his scepticism toward aspirations of 'faceless anonymity' arguing historians are misguided in their belief in 'objectivity, the accuracy of facts and the permanence of the past'. Southgate elaborates that 'in other words it may be time for historians to abandon the scientistically derived pretence of god-like detachment and concede their own inevitable involvement and commitments.' [2]

Not only is complete objectivity impossible, it is also not desirable. 'Nor can there be any justification for the view that the historian can abstain from moral judgements, for it is judgements of value, which give meaning to human action.' [11] Judgements and interpretations *add* value and meaning to a text.

### **Embracing centrism**

"Here I stand" These three powerful words convey Martin Luther's consciousness of egocentricity: an exact point in space and time; a particular physical and intellectual/theological/political location that he was at, in that particular moment. [2] Postmodernists reject the Modernist belief in the possibility of adopting a single standpoint - geographical and chronologically - from which

science, history, theology etc, may be analysed and written. Postmodernists ask: what makes their telescopic position so privileged?

Throughout history this privilege was granted to history's winners - those in position to write it. Implicit with this privilege is potential for bias, one-sided perspectives, political motivations, propaganda, faming of heroes, demonization of oppositions, and recording of themselves as drivers of history. Flowing from this privileged viewpoint consider more recent Eurocentricism of scholars like Baudrillard, 'We in Europe possess the art of thinking, of analysing things and reflecting on them' and, 'No one disputes our historical subtlety and conceptual imagination' [14] or John Vincent, 'We do not understand Asia and will not need to' stated only 13 years ago in 1995. [2] Need more be said?

Postmodernists believe centrism is unavoidable. In *Structure, Sign and Play* Derrida talks about the 'structurality of the structure', which has always been 'neutralized or reduced... by the process of giving it a center... a point of presence, a fixed origin.' This center's function is to orient, balance and organize the structure and also to limit the *play* of the structure. [15]

From this centric position, every writer frames their writing. Out of the trillions of possible histories one could write, he/she selects a topic, sources, quotes and words, all inevitably influenced by personal experiences, interests, values and beliefs, and the particular location from which observations are made, described and interpreted. The same principle can (and should) be applied to their sources, and their sources' sources – each whom inevitably wrote and observed from their particular location in time and space. Postmodernism calls into question the historical objectivity of these influences, encouraging the maximum integrity, authenticity, and credibility- the common goals of all historians.

### **Considering relativism and self-deconstruction**

‘We’re always at once inside and outside the logocentric. We have to be self-watchful. We have to self-deconstruct’ [6] Consider the metaphoric image of a river. Standing *in the water* you feel the river’s direction, its temperature, its power, that is, you delve into depths of various perspectives and understand how particular people felt and saw the world in their particular time and location. Standing *by the river* you see the trees and animals it sustains, and you can understand how these perspectives fit into their surroundings. Standing *on a hill* you see the river's form, discovering how these perspectives fit together. Observing the river *from the air*, you see its beginning and end, grasping where a collection of perspectives are situated in time and space. All in the while look *within ourselves*, where we have been, and how this could influence our interpretation of the river before us. [16]

From authors to nations, a critical self-awareness should be held of themselves and of their surrounds. This is essential for protection against misguided politics and propaganda. 'The recognition of inescapable operations of power in the creation of historical discourse, in short by an understanding of the politics of academic history' [10]

Postmodernism questions of how one own perspective is situated relative to others’ perspectives, how one’s experience is situated relative to others’ experience, and how one’s culture is situated relative to other cultures.

Particularly in the last few centuries, we have accumulated much knowledge about ourselves, our neighboring cultures and the universe at large. This knowledge continues to dramatically change our consciousness, in turn revolutionizing our lifestyles and environment. The Internet has provided a means of distribution of knowledge, a worldwide web of communication networks unlike anything ever experienced in recorded history. We face an information overload, intensifying the importance of critical evaluation skills, evaluating everything we read, think, feel and write. As Donald Rumsfeld once observed, there are ‘known-knowns’ (things we know we know), ‘known-unknowns’ (things we know we do not know) and ‘unknown-unknowns’ (things

we don't know we don't know) [17]. If we can be honest about these three categories of knowledge, identifying our assumptions and imperfections, constantly questioning and revising in *pursuit of truth*, then instead of uncontrollable power, knowledge will bring an excremental wisdom.

### **Promoting plurality**

Postmodernism promotes a plurality of visions, alternatives and voices. Coinciding the period of Postmodernity, were the 1960s and 70s social movements of the 'New Left', liberation movements of black, women and gay, de-colonization and student protests against bureaucracy and hierarchy. Postmodernism and these movements fed from each other's ideas, spurning accepted narratives [2], together profoundly altering western mentalities and values. Central roles of male/female and imperialist/colonist must continue to be historicised, their contingency and heterogeneity recognised. As the supposed fixity of these identities is questioned, the centres of our histories *are* destabilised, but isn't this a worthy sacrifice if it brings us to a deeper, more accurate understanding of the past?

### **Identifying and addressing key problems**

#### **Nihilism**

Derrida says 'the persistent search for a centre, a fundamental ground', maintains a given structure in a 'false state of immobility, of finality, of fixed truth.' We should conceive structures without a centre, so we can see they are 'open to interpretation without end, unconfined, unreduced, unfinalized, not continuous, not linear, where truth is never arrived at, is always involved in a play of differences that keep deferring its arrival, its full presence.' [15]

This statement is threatening for historians, who believe in a final fixed representation of truth. If history is open to interpretation without any end, and the truth can never be found, then what is the point at all? Keith Jenkins says, 'My argument, is that if Derrida and Rorty et al. can do without history... then we all can... The idea of the historical past can... be considered as just one more example of the many imaginaries we have fabricated to help us make some sense of the apparent senselessness of existence.' [2]

Jenkins doesn't seem to consider the idea that the 'process of knowledge consists... not so much in the answers given as in the questions raised.' [11] Derrida makes a virtue of instability. Like Socrates, he believes we should endlessly question the most fundamental aspects of our lives, 'it is endlessly necessary to renew transcendental questioning.' Ongoing questioning may actually bring Jenkins *closer* to the objective knowledge he desires. Deconstructing leads to more veracious interpretations of the past and a more complete understanding of history.

### **Infinitive pluralism**

In entertaining the idea of an infinite number of centres, each centre claiming equal validity, the myriad of new perspectives draw historians to a new problem, which perspective should he/she choose? The choice is inevitably partial, only ever representing a *part* of the potential whole, chosen as a result of individual's own interests and agenda.

Rather than giving up in frustration, thinking because there will never be one universal history, it is not worth bothering at all, historians should rejoice in the fact that their work will never be complete. There will always be more perspectives waiting to be uncovered. Each perspective *adding* to the universal catalogue of knowledge, not threatening it or making it void.

### **Fostering misuse**

"I can do anything I want" Anon. Postmodernism gets criticized for allowing writers to choose what fits and what doesn't fit their argument. Selecting which components of history we remember and which we forget.

Contrary to this argument, by encouraging questioning of accepted truths, postmodernism seeks to uncover all facts and perspectives and *exposes* misuse not encourages it. Consider political motives evident in 'history wars' between historians seeking greater truths about the past, and other parties who don't want this truth to be known. [18] Keith Windschuttle in his book *The fabrication of*

*Aboriginal history*, looks at the history of early Australian colonials and Aborigines, arguing that much of the generally accepted version is based on incomplete or incorrect facts. He provides evidence for massacres blamed on whites and a stolen cow, but in fact were killing of Aborigines by Aborigines over a lost lover. [19] Windschuttle seeks ‘not only to present a more credible factual record of this subject but also to explain why there have been so many people throughout our history who have *wanted* so badly to believe the worst possible story.’ [19] This postmodern approach demonstrates the importance of postmodernism to history, even if the writer would prefer not to think of it this way. (See Windschuttle’s other book *Killing of History* [31])

### **Language games**

Chapter three of Lyotard’s essay *The postmodern condition : a report on knowledge*, is titled ‘The Method: Language Games.’ Lyotard plays with words, making observations such as ‘rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation’, ‘if there are no rules, there is no game’ and that ‘every utterance should be thought of as a “move” in a game’. [1] If allowed to, language games distract from the purpose of a text, belittling legitimate arguments by introducing a ‘constant struggle, if not against each other than against themselves.’ [20] Language games are a frustration faced not only in postmodernism, but faced in many philosophical debates.

What has to be recognized is that language games are just that – *games*. Play them knowing their place. Language games can be avoided by keeping focused on the purpose of a text, so that the argument is kept clear and goals may be achieved.

### **Hypocritical nature**

Docker criticizes Lyotard's essay, believing it to be authoritarian, totalizing, asserting a positivistic truth – that is, presenting the very grand-narrative that in *The Postmodern Condition*, he said we should disregard [6]. Postmodernism states that the ‘Truth’ is that there ‘Is No Truth,’ and in doing so it presents a grand-narrative in itself.

To avoid this hypocritical nature, Postmodernism must follow its own recommendations, deconstructing itself and being honest about its limitations. This essay is an attempt to do just that.

### **Lack of big-picture**

A part of the appeal of history is the desire to find roots of personal identity. To fix a past, and see where we have come from, provides us a framework and ascribes some direction and meaning to our lives. For this purpose it makes sense to create chronological structure, and essentialize the past into it. Arthur Danto points out if our belief in real history is shattered, our actions lose their point, and our lives their purpose: 'For when the past is in doubt, a question mark blurs the present' [12] The postmodern approach of constantly pulling it apart leaves the reader frustrated and lost.

This problem identifies benefits of the grand-narratives of modernism, a large gap in the postmodern theory. In looking to the future of history, this problem must be addressed.

### **Universal truths**

Some facts speak for themselves. Charles 1, in the end, was beheaded. [10] There are some forms of evidence that are indisputable, and must be treated as such. Joyce explains that once you have evidence, then you can make interpretations.

Postmodernism can question the evidence of even the most unquestioned facts, for example investigating 'was Charles 1 really beheaded?' 'What evidence exists for this fact?' After questioning, investigations and conclusions are made, keeping in mind a historian's objective of truth, they must put aside language games and accept that some truths are universal. Once a fact has been proved true it can be treated as such, until new evidence proves it otherwise.

### **Need for structures**

Letters are compiled into words compiled into sentences, within the rules and structures of a language. Without this structure – or narrative, we could not communicate our ideas. Today is Tuesday the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 2008- meaning it has been 2008 years (give or take a few), since the "birth of Jesus Christ"- a historical figure whose historicity is also debated. In Japan it is currently the year 20, it has been twenty years since the current emperor took reign. It is interesting to consider what these dating systems themselves tell us about the 'objectivity of history' and the point of centrality.

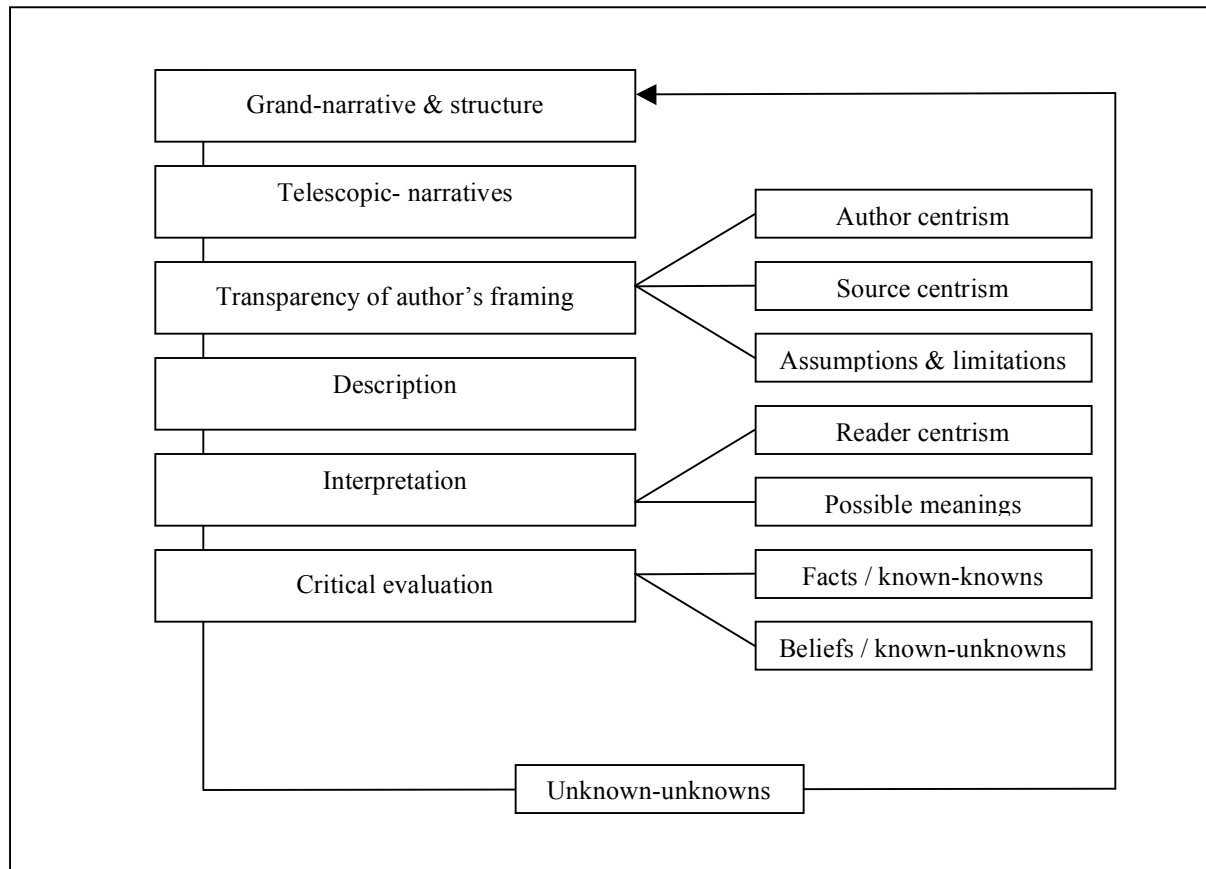
It is not possible, nor desirable, to abandon all structures and meta-narratives. They are an essential component to understanding and finding meaning in life, to furthering our education, expanding our consciousness and the development of our society. The postmodern idea of rejecting these structures is a big weakness in postmodern theory, and must be addressed in future models.

### **Future of history: a synthesis of modern and postmodern**

The discourse so far has made the case that postmodern concepts have the potential to take historians to a deeper level of realism, encouraging subjection of themselves and their work to critical assessment. It has also noted the frustrating language games, illogical rejections of known facts, desirable structures, and big picture conceptions that Postmodernism also brings to the table. In summ, postmodernism alone does not provide a sufficient method of addressing history, nor does modernism. Each provides opposing advantages and disadvantages, leaving big gaps in understanding and taking historians further away from their objectives.

The solution I propose is a model which synthesises modernism and postmodernism. Call it 'post-postmodernism', 'neo-modernism' or maybe a 'post-modernistic modernism', this synthesis combines macro and micro perspectives with self-awareness, transparency of motives, assumptions and limitations. By looking at all narratives in this way we can transcend appearances, and formulate the most comprehensive understanding possible.

Figure 1.1 – A Synthesis of Modern and Post-Modern



Beginning with a modern grand-narrative and structure provides a framework for big-picture understanding; simultaneously aspired to and treated with suspicion. Postmodern telescopic-narratives go beyond the great story, providing detailed examples for comparison and analysis, exploring new voices and stimulating discussion; and at the same time subverting the tendencies to closure in all narratives. [21]

Following this combination of macro and micro- perspectives, the model moves to a postmodern idea of discourse, beginning with transparency of the author's framing, acknowledging limitations of an author's standpoint and sources. The author can then provide a description of facts and interpretations. Readers interpret the author's interpretation creating their own meaning through their personal centric viewpoint. Interpretations are then subjected to critical assessment, so that the reader can distinguish facts from beliefs, descriptions from interpretations and assumptions

from realities. This model attempts to clearly distinguish facts (what we know we know) and beliefs (what we know we do not know), whilst sustaining flexibility for 'everything we know' to be challenged by unknown-unknowns (the things we do not know we do not know).

The objective would continue to be, as it always has/should have been, 'Truth.' Ongoing questioning allows us to grow closer and closer to this objective. Whether or not we ever reach this objective is irrelevant, it is the *process* of striving toward it that brings the rewards. The grand-narrative is treated as a tentative working hypotheses open to revision in light of new information, maximising our understanding of history at any given moment in time

### **In closing**

This essay addresses the controversial nature regarding the application of postmodern ideas to history. I argue the case that postmodernism not killed history, believing postmodern ideas can be incorporated into history, enhancing not annihilating it.

Through an exploration of key concepts and criticisms, I formulated a model that bridges the perceived polemics modernism and postmodernism. The model proposes stating a grand-narrative whilst simultaneously questioning, deconstructing and upholding flexibility to change when new information arises. Rather than selecting one or the other, claiming it to be correct and the other false, the proposed model demonstrates the potential for this unison to enhance the historians' pursuit of a true representation of the past.

This discourse and model should not be taken as complete or final, but as an example of a narrative awaiting the continuing process of refinement and improvement. So, '*sapere aude*' - let us dare to question, challenge, change and refine... let us 'dare to know'.

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