8 Postmodernity and the information society

Introduction

Postmodernity and postmodernism are difficult theoretical themes to define succinctly. The two terms are closely related, although – like the distinction between modernity and modernism – there are fundamental differences. Postmodernity refers to social, economic, political and technological developments that have characterized the transition from modern to newly-organized, postmodern ways of life. Two aspects of postmodernity are often marked out: first, the emergence and proliferation of new media, information and communications technologies that trigger social change and are particularly indicative of globalization; and, second, the rise of consumer culture and simultaneous demise of certain forms of production (Lyon 1999: 10). Some other important developments related to postmodernity are listed in Figure 8.1. Essentially we see a transition from the elitist values of modernity – espoused by a capitalist ruling elite and manifested in ‘high culture’ – to a postmodern ‘flattening of hierarchies’ (Bauman 1992: 34). At first, this seems like social progress, but postmodern critics such as Zygmunt Bauman consider postmodern relationships to be fragmentary, shallow, driven by consumerism, and lacking moral responsibility to others – especially disadvantaged groups unable to reap the rewards of this so-called progress (see Bauman 1996). In contrast to postmodernity, the term ‘postmodernism’ refers to art, literature and cultural criticism that have supplanted the modernist tradition. Postmodernism is seen as a reaction to the elitism of high modernism (evident in, for example, the Leavisite tradition as discussed in Chapter 3) and a rejection of realism – the artistic endeavour to represent an objective reality (e.g. Dickens’s realist novels about everyday poverty).

This chapter deals with postmodernity in relation to media theory, but by definition there are significant overlaps with theories of postmodernism. Dominic Strinati (1995) refers to five key features of postmodernism:

1. Breakdown of the distinction between culture and society: as he states, ‘the importance and power of the mass media and popular culture mean that they govern and shape all other forms of social relationships’ (Strinati 1995: 224). Our perceptions of the social environment in which we live are largely informed by mediated cultural representations such as news images.

2. An emphasis on style over substance: we consume images and
Women gain the right to vote (1920 in the United States, 1928 in Britain).

Education and literacy levels increase throughout the social strata.

Increased affluence – also experienced by the working-class population – means greater social mobility.

Rise in demand for service industries to serve the masses (mass retail, mass consumerism, mass media).

Technological innovation propels globalization – a combination of cultural homogenization and diversity.

Figure 8.1 Postmodernity and the empowered masses: some reasons for the decline of modernism and elitist 'high culture'

spectacles, as opposed to forms of communication such as the written word that encourage us to ponder and reflect.

3 Breakdown of the distinction between high art and popular culture: this is a modernist distinction that is now threatened by postmodern media culture that embraces both 'art' and 'the popular' (pop music, Hollywood, and so on).

4 Confusions over time and space: the globalizing tendencies of communications technologies, economics and politics are distorting traditional conceptions of time and space dimensions.

5 Decline of metanarratives: grand theories such as Marxism, Christianity and, of course, modernism have lost their currency for modern societies.

All these five features – in their original conceptions – will be applied to media and postmodernity in the course of this chapter. Somewhat challenging the fifth feature, however, will be our discussion of the information society thesis that could be construed, paradoxically, as a postmodern metanarrative.

Baudrillard: hyperreality and simulation

Jean Baudrillard is the best known and arguably the most elusive theorist of postmodernity. His elusiveness is partly due to the cryptic style in which he writes but is also due to the controversial – and apparently absurd – character of his theories. 'The Gulf War did not take place' and 'Disneyland is the real America' appear to be ridiculous claims but, as we shall see, Baudrillard presents a complex argument that offers a specific interpretation of these theoretical statements. He argues that postmodern societies – saturated by media and information technologies – have entered an age of simulation, and
more particularly an age of third-order simulation. Third-order simulation differs from two earlier forms of simulation, as detailed in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1  Baudrillard's three orders of simulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order of simulation</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-order</td>
<td>Signification (signs which imitate real things)</td>
<td>Reality is constructed through representation (e.g. maps, paintings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-order</td>
<td>Reproduction (signs refer to signs which imitate real things)</td>
<td>Representations of reality (first-order) are reproduced by mechanical technologies (e.g. photography, film)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-order</td>
<td>Simulation (signs no longer represent real things but serve to mask this absence of reality)</td>
<td>No connection exists between reality and representation – instead we have hyperreality (e.g. Disneyland)</td>
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First-order and second-order simulation maintain a relationship between reality and representations (signs) of reality – indeed, second-order simulation is the type celebrated by Benjamin (as discussed in Chapter 3). By contrast, third-order simulation amounts to a system of signs that bear no relation to reality or its representations, but function to conceal this absence of genuinely real things. Disneyland, according to Baudrillard, is a third-order simulation. Disneyland is pure fantasy, of course, but it simultaneously functions ‘to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation’ (Baudrillard 1983: 25). This is what Baudrillard means when he states that Disneyland is the real America, because the real America is actually a hyperreal phenomenon divorced from the once genuinely real place called America that has now vanished from human experience. Hyperreality, therefore, is the outcome of simulated imagery – what Baudrillard calls simulacra: ‘The simulacrum denies not reality, but the difference between the image and the real ... there is no difference between the image and other orders of experience’ (Fiske 1991b: 57–8). Los Angeles is its media images and cultural myths more so than it is a real, material, geographical location. We have nothing real to believe in except hyperreal (more real than genuinely real) simulation and simulacra.

What has brought about this postmodern age of simulation and hyperreality? For Baudrillard, the transformation of signs no longer referring to real things as they are channelled through media and communications
technologies - especially television - has collapsed the separation between the real (the physical, terrestrial habitat) and the metaphysical (knowledge beyond this habitat). Like ‘an astronaut in his capsule’ each human being is ‘at the controls of a micro-satellite, in orbit, living no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks. Television is still the most direct prefiguration of this ... regulating everything from a distance’ (Baudrillard 1985: 128). Just as prisons conceal the fact that society as a whole is imprisoned in the sense of being unable to access genuine reality, so television and other electronic media conceal processes of simulation which effectively regulate and restrict our versions of the ‘reality’ (hyperreality actually) we sense around us. As Bauman states, ‘For Baudrillard, society itself is now made to the measure of television ... One can no longer speak of the distortion of reality: there is nothing left to measure the image against’ (Bauman 1992: 33). Similarly, the omnipresence of mediated advertising ‘invades everything, as public space (the street, monument, market, scene) disappears ... Not a public scene or true public space but gigantic spaces of circulation, ventilation and ephemeral connections’ (Baudrillard 1985: 129-30). This media power to saturate public and private spaces or scenes by harassing us with obscene simulations - what he refers to as ‘a whole pornography of information and communication’ - is what Baudrillard calls ‘the ecstasy of communication. All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information’ (Baudrillard 1985: 130-1). Television, telephone and radio are just three media technologies that partake in this ecstasy of communication – they invade our lives and confuse our sense of knowing what we want. This, in turn, creates a new form of schizophrenia caused by ‘too great a proximity to everything’ (Baudrillard 1985: 132).

Baudrillard’s theory of media-saturated simulation owes much to McLuhan’s statement that ‘the medium is the message’ (as discussed in Chapter 3). His suggestion that information devours its own content and that ‘Only the medium can make an event – whatever the contents’ (Baudrillard 1994: 82) is clearly McLuhan-esque, and Baudrillard draws on McLuhan’s ideas in several of his works. However, Baudrillard’s hyperreality theory goes a step further than McLuhan’s medium theory:

there is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is, in the same movement, the implosion of the medium itself in the real, the implosion of the medium and of the real in a sort of hyperreal nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined

(Baudrillard 1994: 82).

The medium is the real message in McLuhan’s theory of modernity but, having undergone postmodern transformation, the medium and the message
collapse into a third-order simulation of the real (i.e. the hyperreal). For Baudrillard, medium (technology) and message (content) are no longer real because they saturate any genuine sense of reality that distinguishes between them. There are some other fundamental differences between the two theorists that are often understated. One commentator argues that McLuhan’s emphasis on the power of technological form over content is counteracted by Baudrillard’s theory of simulation which emphasizes ‘the sign-form, not technology per se’ (Merrin 2005: 50). The semiotic transformation of signs and symbols (that no longer refer to real things) is not determined by technology but by human perception of – and participation in – the ecstasy of communication. Technology is therefore secondary to the implosion of the message (and the medium) into simulation. Another difference cited by William Merrin is McLuhan’s ‘global village’ perspective that electronic media foster retribalization compared to Baudrillard’s vision of ‘an indistinct mass created by, refusing and imploding with the circuit of communication’ (Merrin 2005: 53). Baudrillard’s claim that media power abolishes social relations and transforms individuals into networked terminals is far less optimistic than McLuhan’s version, the latter of which is closer to theories of progressive information society (as discussed later in this chapter).

We cannot leave our discussion of Baudrillard, however, without considering how his theory of simulation casts doubt on the ‘reality’ of the first Gulf War (Baudrillard 1995) as well as the 9/11 terrorist atrocities (Baudrillard 2002). The Gulf War did not take place, according to Baudrillard, because it was won by the mighty US Air Force before it had begun. The lasting memories of this war for most people were screened images – transmitted via military operations to CNN and other Western media – showing how US pilots pinpointed and then bombed Iraqi targets (bridges, hospitals, military camps) from thousands of miles above land. As such, ‘This war is conducted according to the media model: war as a technological relationship ... founded on the abolition of symbolic exchange and the simulation of real communication’ (Merrin 2005: 84). This is not a war in the sense of prolonged combat and conflict (the first two world wars, by contrast, really did take place); instead, we experience a virtual war, much like a video game simulates real warfare, and therefore this real-time, media-saturated spectacle is nothing other than what Baudrillard calls a ‘non-event’. Subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq amount to ‘a rehash of the past, with the same deluge of military forces, bogus information, senseless bombardment, emotive and deceitful language, technological deployment and brainwashing. Like the Gulf War: a non-event, an event that does not take place’ (Baudrillard 2002: 34).

What happened to the weapons of mass destruction that Iraq was supposed to possess? They did not exist. Baudrillard might use this evidence of ‘bogus information’ and the emotive language it engendered to argue that the
subsequent conflict is a mere simulation to those who fight and witness it. Then again, one obvious criticism of this 'non-event' thesis is that no simulated, virtual war that 'did not take place' has ever resulted in so many casualties and fatalities, not to mention changes to world order. It is easy to sympathize with one critic who refers to Baudrillard's 'stupid and irresponsible position' and 'his rampant relativism which refuses to discriminate between degrees of authenticity' (Webster 2002: 256-7).

9/11, on the other hand, did take place and was 'the absolute event': 'The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event' (Baudrillard 2002: 4). Terrorist violence - unlike the violence of the Gulf War - amounts to an exchange of symbolic violence in which 'the media are part of the event, they are part of the terror' (Baudrillard 2002: 31). Although the destruction of the World Trade Center was a real event, however, its symbolic collapse was more significant and came before its physical collapse. According to Baudrillard, 'The architectural object was destroyed, but it was the symbolic object which was targeted and which it was intended to demolish ... no one, not even the terrorists, had reckoned on the total destruction of the towers' (Baudrillard 2002: 48). The objective of the terrorists was to demonstrate 'the terrorism of spectacle' as opposed to the spectacle of terrorism (Baudrillard 2002: 30). Even though the twin towers did collapse and thousands of people died, Baudrillard insists that this Manhattan disaster movie was not a real event for those who witnessed it on television because 'the fascination of the attack is primarily a fascination with the image', and 'The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption' (Baudrillard 2002: 27-9). The event and the image present entirely different experiences. In the case of real-time media coverage, 'the image is there first, and the frisson of the real is added' to create 'a fiction surpassing fiction' (Baudrillard 2002: 29). While Baudrillard makes a convincing point about the power of imagery over unmediated experience in contemporary culture, he neglects to pursue his initial claim in The Spirit of Terrorism (2002) that the events of 9/11 - far from mere simulation - had a very real consequence for history and the events that were to follow.

Boorstin and Debord: the image and the spectacle

Two important influences on Baudrillard's theory of simulation are Daniel J. Boorstin's The Image (first published in 1961) and Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle (first published in 1967). Boorstin explores the concept of 'pseudo-events', especially rife in news media and not dissimilar to Baudrillard's media-simulated 'non-events'. Boorstin argues that the omnipresence of images, which are so easy to produce and distribute via multi-media channels in the late twentieth century, are indicative of a Graphic Revolution
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(Boorstin 1992: 13) – a wholesale change in the way we view the reality of our world. Instead of increasing our awareness of the world, however, Boorstin suggests that news media do not usually report ‘real’, truthful events but instead deal in a currency of false, pseudo-events. A pseudo-event is ‘not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it. Typically, it is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview’ (Boorstin 1992: 11). Boorstin lays the blame for this state of affairs at the feet of public relations and journalistic practices. The press conference, for example, is a contrived pseudo-event carefully planned by newsworthy individuals or institutions in order to satisfy journalists’ insatiable appetite for fresh ‘news’. It is a self-fulfilling pseudo-event that offers little genuine news value at all. The British Prime Minister’s weekly press briefing, for example, is staged and usually reported in news bulletins even if the Prime Minister has nothing really new to say. An up-to-date image of the Prime Minister along with his latest spin doctoring message is enough to hit the headlines. Boorstin even suggests that pseudo-events have diminished what it means to be a famous public figure. Real heroes of the past who undertook great feats have been replaced by manufactured, image-conscious celebrities who have no genuine talent. The technological progress that would lead to intellectual and political enlightenment – as promised by Benjamin and McLuhan – is not shared by the impotence of this postmodern Graphic Revolution.

Guy Debord offers a similarly cynical perspective on what he terms ‘the spectacle’ which ‘is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production’ (Debord 1994: 13). He notes: ‘the world we see is the world of the commodity’ (Debord 1994: 29). By extension, Debord’s theory of the spectacle is not limited to mass media images, but is more centrally to do with modern capitalist economies that produce a form of spectacle which isolates and alienates those who are forced to consume it. It is only when ‘the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image’ (Debord 1994: 24) that it fulfils this function of alienation, and the spectacle only becomes image when mediated through technologies such as television which ‘serve as weapons for that [spectacular] system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of the “lonely crowd”’ (Debord 1994: 22). The spectacle is therefore not primarily a collection of images but ‘a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (Debord 1994: 12). Nonetheless, this relationship is entirely based on appearances and images – a false reality – that conceals a real world of capitalist exploitation and class division. Echoing Baudrillard, Debord states that ‘the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different specialized mediations’ (Debord 1994: 17). The word seen is italicized by Debord because sight is the human sense most vulnerable to deception and false belief. After all, seeing is believing – but we do not always see through artifice and manipulation.

Although originally intended as Marxist rather than postmodern theory,
Debord's work has since been closely associated with the postmodernist emphasis on style over substance; image over reality. This is particularly evident in one of the two forms of the spectacle he outlines (Debord 1994: 41-3). First, we have the concentrated form of spectacle, which is associated with bureaucratic ownership and restriction of choice in the capitalist realms of production and labour. More significant, though, is a second form that Debord calls the diffuse form of spectacle, which is associated with the abundance of commodities in the capitalist mode of consumption. He identifies 'the pseudo-need imposed by the reign of modern consumerism ... Waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fuelled by the communications media, are propagated with lightning speed' (Debord 1994: 44). The triumph of the spectacular economy, therefore, springs from its 'ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs' (Debord 1994: 33) that strike a familiar chord with Boorstin's pseudo-events. One such 'specialized mediation' of these false needs is the media celebrity. While Boorstin ridicules the emptiness of the image-conscious media celebrity, Debord conceives them as spectacular representations of ordinary people who turn their spectacle into 'images of possible roles' for us to identify with so as 'to compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity' (Debord 1994: 38). Celebrities provide us with false representations of life, which reinforces Debord's argument that the spectacle they produce - via media - is not perceptible to direct experience and is predominantly experienced as a series of appearances. However, this spectacle becomes the reality of our everyday lives to the extent that social life becomes an alienating scenario grounded entirely in appearances (first impressions). On the other hand, real class inequalities, poverty and social exclusion - created by the capitalist mode of production and its uneven distribution of wealth - are concealed by the spectacle in order to protect the dominant order of power from the proletariat uprising predicted by Marx.

Jameson: pastiche and intertextuality

Although principally a postmodernist, Fredric Jameson's theories of contemporary media and culture, like Debord's theory of spectacle, owe much to Marxism. Jameson argues that we have entered a stage of late capitalism associated with post-industrial, consumer societies and globalization in the shape of multinational economies. Postmodern culture 'replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism' (Jameson 1998: 20) by embracing all things 'popular' and rejecting the modernist values of non-commercial, 'high art'. While modernism sought to clearly distinguish high culture from mass or popular culture, the onset of postmodernism – from the post-war boom of the 1950s onwards – has meant that 'the line between high
art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw' (Jameson 1998: 2). This cultural turn from modernism to postmodernism is centred on 'The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasingly unavailability of the personal style' (Jameson 1991: 16). Modernist art and literature cherish the value of individuality and the 'first-person' voice in stark contrast to the hostility of an outside world marked by rampant modernity – industrialization, scientific and technological advance, rationalization, and so on (see theories of modernity in Chapter 3). James Joyce's 'stream of consciousness' technique – in which an author's thoughts and feelings are directly translated into a rambling written style – typifies the individual style of modernism. Postmodernist culture, from Jameson's point of view, dismisses the possibility that an individual style can still exist in a late capitalist era where all new styles are immediately incorporated to serve the intentions of global, consumer capitalism.

Jameson's notion of pastiche – and the way pastiche differs from the practice of 'parody' – is central to his postmodernist perspective on the disappearance of individuality and originality. Parody is a general technique of mimicry, not peculiar to postmodernism, which has the comic intention to 'produce an imitation which mocks the original' (Jameson 1998: 4). Impersonators deploy parody to mimic the actions and behaviour of others, especially famous people. Importantly, parody acknowledges what it imitates and does not ignore the sanctity of the original form. As such, 'there is a linguistic norm' (Jameson 1998: 4) behind parody. Parody mocks but does not threaten the existence of original meanings (language). By contrast, pastiche is a technique peculiar to postmodernism because it denies the existence of – refuses to acknowledge – the original form it appears to be imitating. Pastiche is less about comedy and more about plagiarism. Pastiche does not accept that 'some healthy linguistic normality still exists' (Jameson 1991: 17) because, unlike parody, it has no satirical purpose and does not distinguish its own mimic from an original form. As such, 'Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour' (Jameson 1998: 5). Pastiche is the outcome of wider trends in postmodernity that have arisen from the compartmentalization of the professions since the earlier developments of modernity. For Jameson, the fragmentation and privatization of language into different styles associated with these professional practices – medicine, law, literature, and so on – have meant these styles are now impossible to ridicule because there is no longer a universal 'linguistic norm' through which to parody such styles. Postmodernist, pastiche styles therefore arise from both the disappearance of originality (linguistic norms) and the disappearance of parody, which relies on an original form with which to mock.

Pastiche is closely linked with Jameson's theory of intertextuality that he defines 'as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and as the operator of a new connotation of “pastness” and pseudo-historical depth, in
which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history' (Jameson 1991: 20). As well as the disappearance of individuality and originality, postmodern culture has lost its sense of the past because the past has become romanticized by artistic representations of history that are clouded by nostalgia. As the author states, 'we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach' (Jameson 1998: 10). Mike Featherstone makes a similar point about the aestheticization of the present day as evidenced by 'the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society' (Featherstone 1991: 66), of which MTV and its 'three-minute concentration span' philosophy is a prime example. For Jameson, intertextuality is a practice typically found in postmodern films and other media texts that borrow features from other texts. Like pastiche, intertextuality is not about an overt acknowledgement of the original text (or texts) from which it is borrowing certain features but rather about an insistence on the disappearing sense of anything original or historical that has gone before. Intertextuality operates in a perpetual present because postmodernity has effectively obliterated any genuine sense of the past. Jameson identifies the 'nostalgia film' as an example of pastiche and intertextuality in practice. American Graffiti (1973), for example, aims to 'recapture all the atmosphere and stylistic peculiarities of the 1950s United States' (Jameson 1998: 7-8) by imitating - in pastiche form - both the content and the formal filmic techniques associated with earlier representations of the rock and roll generation. Chinatown (1974) likewise is a pastiche of 1930s America and aesthetic styles of American filmmaking familiar to this period.

Pastiche as it operates in a nostalgic mode differs from imitation as practised in the more generic category of 'historical film', however, because it colonizes 'even those movies today which have contemporary settings, as though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present' (Jameson 1998: 9). Films more or less about the present day - such as Star Wars (1977) and The Day After Tomorrow (2004) - are incapable of creating new, original representations of contemporary life, and are therefore forced to pastiche aesthetic (filmic) styles of a previous age, such as science-fiction literature and the 'disaster movie' genre, as evidenced by covert, intertextual references. Usually these references to previous films or generic conventions operate on an unconscious level and are not easily identifiable. In these cases, film directors may well refuse to acknowledge their indebtedness to a particular filmic style or scene - in keeping with the practice of pastiche - but instances of intertextuality are always able to be drawn because so-called 'new' styles have 'already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the unique ones have been thought of already' (Jameson 1998: 7). There are occasions, though, when intertextual references are self-consciously constructed for purposes of parody, in 'spoofs' like the Naked Gun

...
films (1988; 1991). In these films or other media texts, intertextuality is not a specifically postmodern facet.

Jameson’s postmodernist theories of pastiche and intertextuality can certainly be applied to various media and cultural examples, and not just films. Certain forms of popular music, for example, ‘sample’ or draw from previous sounds and tracks (pastiche), and these forms can be distinguished from overt ‘covers’ that – like parody – acknowledge an original version. We should be keen to critically evaluate these theories, though. Is originality really impossible today? This partly depends on what we mean by originality. Jameson appears to define the individual style as unique and entirely new, according to high modernism, but that famous modernist T. S. Eliot understood the ‘individual talent’ as emerging from a concern with both tradition and novelty; with an historical sense ‘not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’ (Eliot 1951: 14). Eliot’s definition of originality, therefore, is not about uniqueness but about adding a distinctive contribution to an existing ‘ideal order’ of canonical art and literature. What Jameson defines as unoriginal intertextuality, then, amounts to a more conservative interpretation of tradition-minded individual talent in Eliotian terms. Another criticism we might level at Jameson is that by referring to the disappearance of our sense of history, he also appears conveniently to neglect a long history of pastiche-like intertextuality. Shakespeare’s plays, for instance Anthony and Cleopatra, are full of intertextual references to earlier chronicles without overtly acknowledging the historical origins of their narratives. Jameson does make it clear that aesthetic practices of pastiche have existed longer than postmodernism but that ‘we have something new when they become the central features of cultural production’ (Jameson 1998: 18). Is pastiche so central to contemporary media and cultural texts? Films and music – associated with genre traditions – are perhaps often pastiche-like, but what about less predictable media texts such as live (television) coverage of news or sports events? Are not live, ‘real-time’ media texts, by definition, original? Jameson might argue that while the content of live media may be original, the formal ways in which media represent live action always draw on pre-existing aesthetic styles.

Lyotard: the decline of metanarratives

For Jean-François Lyotard, the forces of multinational capitalism have not so much brought about the death of modernist ‘high art’ as the delegitimization of assumed scientific knowledge. The sacred truth of science, like art, so coveted in the age of modernity, is threatened by the onset of postmodernity. Lyotard’s postmodern theory of knowledge is grounded in the decline of two types of metanarrative (or grand narrative): the narrative of
emancipation and the narrative of speculation. Both of these narratives sought to legitimate—justify as true—their claims about the virtues of science and knowledge against the sins of ignorance, religion and superstition characteristic of pre-modern societies (see Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3). The narrative of emancipation or freedom is a political narrative, often utilized by the state in their provision of school education, which tells of science as a great, liberating force against the shackles of an older, feudal, medieval order (also known as the 'Dark Ages' given that the medieval period had not yet been enlightened by the truth of scientific knowledge). Likewise, the narrative of speculation sought to legitimize scientific knowledge, but in the form of a philosophical narrative associated with the rise of university education that was not so bound to state politics. Narratives of speculation differed from those of emancipation by not accepting statements of knowledge at face value and emphasizing a holistic approach to unified learning—combining the arts and sciences—rather than, in the unification of the narrative of emancipation, separating knowledge into distinct but related disciplines (e.g. physics, mathematics and economics). Regardless of their political and philosophical differences, both types of metanarrative are in decline. Lyotard’s perspective is clearly contrary to Foucault’s (1989) theory of discourse as exclusionary power and knowledge (see Chapter 4).

According to Lyotard, postmodern culture has led to a situation in which ‘The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation’ (Lyotard 1984: 37). Reasons for this loss of credibility in metanarratives are not fully accounted for by Lyotard, but he tentatively suggests that several outcomes of advanced liberal capitalism have affected such a decline in belief about grand ideas and ways of knowing the world. Like Jameson, he suggests that consumerism and ‘the individual enjoyment of goods and services’ are indicative of postmodernity in its denial of the ‘communist alternative’ (Lyotard 1984: 38) or any other grand theory about society other than a liberal capitalist one. As well as the capitalist prosperity enjoyed by advanced societies in the latter half of the twentieth century, Lyotard argues that it is understandable that ‘the disorienting upsurge of technology would have an impact on the status of knowledge’ (Lyotard 1984: 38). The proliferation of communications technologies including transportation, media and information systems have meant that ‘knowledge has become the principal force of production over the last few decades’ (Lyotard 1984: 5). Technological advances of this kind have also threatened the narrative of emancipation produced by nation-states because knowledge is able to flow freely across different nations regardless of attempts at state intervention. The computerization of society has meant that information and intellectual property rights, now ‘even more mobile and subject to piracy’ (Lyotard 1984: 6), have become the new battleground for knowledge and
power, not between nation-states but between multinational corporations in pursuit of lucrative consumer markets.

As well as the decline of grand narratives such as communism, Marxism, Christianity and Einstein’s theory of relativity as a result of this commodity production of knowledge by way of information-processing technologies, we might also point to the decline of media metanarratives such as public service broadcasting and ‘freedom of the press’ as the Fourth Estate. On the one hand, public service broadcasters such as the BBC have lost much of their belief in Reithian values of high culture, educative and informative programming. Competition from commercial media systems founded on consumer capitalist values has forced public service broadcasters to produce television and radio shows that appeal to popular tastes more so than the Arnoldian principle of ‘the best of what has been thought’ (see discussion of Schiller in Chapter 7). For example, the appeal of the ‘reality TV’ genre is equally embraced by public service and commercial broadcasters in Britain, given the widely held assumption that such programmes are popular among audiences. The ‘high culture’ metanarrative espoused by Lord Reith – appointed in 1927 as the BBC’s first Director-General – has declined immeasurably in the present-day, ratings-obsessed BBC. The close association between popular aesthetics and postmodernity is no better manifested than in the case of twenty-first-century public service broadcasting, which in highly competitive television markets – such as the USA – is diminishing fast.

On the other hand, the grand narrative of emancipation associated with the Fourth Estate loses its credibility when we consider that access to knowledge production is mostly in the hands of a few multinational news conglomerates (see Chapter 7). Prior to postmodernity, access to mediated knowledge production was in the hands of either the state or a multitude of private enterprises, but concentration of (economic and knowledge) capital alongside a decline in metanarratives of emancipation have effectively delegitimized such knowledge and replaced it with the logic of mass media and mass consumption. A counter-argument in this case, though, is that public service broadcasters and the free press are still alive even if their narratives of emancipation are no longer so convincing. Another criticism we might level at Lyotard’s account is that he appears to be implicitly condoning a new grand narrative of postmodernity despite his claim that grand narratives are no longer credible. If metanarratives really are in decline, nothing theoretically universal like ‘the postmodern condition’ would surely explain what is replacing them. Moreover, Lyotard’s claims about the power of technology and computerized societies resonates with another paradoxical metanarrative of postmodernity, known as the information society thesis.
The information society

Theories of the information society are extensive and diverse in their arguments, and by no means exclusively postmodern in their approach. In the wider scheme of media theory, though, the idea of an information society is closer associated with postmodernity than modernity or any other theoretical theme. One of the most influential theorists in this regard is Daniel Bell, whose work entitled *The Coming of Post-industrial Society* (first published in 1973) inspired new ways of thinking about a post-industrial, postmodern, information age. Bell's perspective on technological innovations in the information sector is largely optimistic. He argues that 'technology has transformed social relationships and our ways of looking at the world' (Bell 1999: 188), increasing human control over nature and transforming economic productivity. Five positive outcomes in this technological transformation of the social world are that:

1. Living standards have risen throughout the world, wages have increased in real terms (taking into account inflation) and social class inequalities in Western societies have been reduced.
2. A 'new class' of engineers, technicians and other planning occupations has been created.
3. A new definition of rationality in the sense of efficiency and optimization – using resources with the least cost and effort – has introduced 'quantitative techniques of engineering and economics [that] now jostle the older modes of speculation, tradition, and reason' (Bell 1999: 189) by enabling more accurate forecasting of social and economic trends.
4. 'New networks of social relationships have been formed' (Bell 1999: 189) which mark a shift from kinship to occupational ties.
5. Perceptions of time and space have been altered, as evidenced in modern art's portrayal of new standards of 'speed' and 'height' compared to an earlier age.

For Bell, these five areas of progress indicate a wider social change from an industrial to a post-industrial society, evident particularly in the United States. Table 8.2 indicates some of the radical differences between the two types of society.

Bell's conception of a post-industrial society is also one in which information and knowledge have replaced material forms of production in a post-Marxist, Baudrillardian sense. No longer is there a division between those who own the means of goods production and the proletarian masses – as some political economists would still suggest – but instead there is a
Table 8.2 Radical differences between the industrial and post-industrial societies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Industrial society</th>
<th>Post-industrial society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regions</strong></td>
<td>Western Europe, Japan</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technology</strong></td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic sector</strong></td>
<td>Secondary (goods manufacturing and processing)</td>
<td>Tertiary (services), Quaternary (finance, insurance), Quinary (health, education, research)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupations</strong></td>
<td>Semi-skilled worker</td>
<td>Professional and technical Scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time perspective</strong></td>
<td>Projections (ad hoc)</td>
<td>Forecasting (future orientation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Bell's (1999: 117) 'General Schema of Social Change'.

bureaucratic division between 'those who have powers of decision and those who have not, in all kinds of organizations, political, economic and social' (Bell 1999: 119). Although post-industrial society is seen by Bell as expanding scientific and technical knowledge to all levels of the social strata, the central problem remains how to adapt public policies to these scientific and technological advances so that the full potential of free-market, post-industrial economics can be realized. In a 1999 Foreword to a new edition of his post-industrial society thesis, Bell discusses the internet as an example of technological empowerment: 'It provides enormous access to the cultural resources of humankind in a way never known of before. It multiplies the number of affinity groups – people with like-minded interests and common professions – across national boundaries' (Bell 1999: lvii). The internet could certainly be theorized in the optimistic terms of Bell’s post-industrial, information age. Social relationships, economic productivity (i.e. e-commerce) and the means of forecasting consumer trends are – at least to some extent – transformed by new media infrastructures like the worldwide web.

Other theorists share Bell’s optimism – for example, see Negroponte (1995) on the revolutionary promise of the digital age. Alvin Toffler’s (1981) account of a third wave that follows the first wave (agricultural) and second wave (industrial) in the historical development of modern societies is not dissimilar to Bell’s distinction between the pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial. For Toffler, the third wave ‘info-sphere’ wrought by technological change is resulting in a de-massified media. Instead of mass media production that prevailed in the second wave, the third-wave emphasis on small-batch, localized production tailored to consumer trends has led to an expansion of choice and competition within media sectors. For example, mass-circulation newspapers that flourished in the second wave have declined in response to
third-wave news and magazine publications 'that serve not the metropolitan mass market but specific neighbourhoods and communities within it' (Toffler 1981: 170). Radio and television programming geared towards particular regions or common interests likewise mark this shift to a de-massified media in the third wave. The third wave also means – unlike Jameson's idea of postmodern pastiche – more diversity:

Today, instead of masses of people all receiving the same messages, smaller de-massified groups receive and send large amounts of their own imagery to one another... This, in part, explains why opinions of everything from pop music to politics are becoming less uniform. Consensus shatters.

(Toffler 1981: 176)

The de-massification of media signals an enormous change in the range and quantity of information we exchange with each other. As we become more individualized and less uniform in our outlooks, we need more information to forecast how others will behave and respond to our behaviour (Toffler 1981: 178). This is why Toffler situates the third wave, above all, within the context of an information society (see also Toffler and Toffler 1995).

Reading Bell and Toffler, we might gain the impression that all is well with an information society. However, there are as many critics as there are exponents of the information society thesis. Philip Elliott (1995) outlines two criticisms: first, he questions the suggestion that information can be equally accessed by all by pointing out that it is in the interests of commercial corporations to keep secret certain kinds of information; and, second, he argues that what appears to be information is very often merely infotainment – a mixture of tabloidized information and entertainment – that has little educative substance. David Lyon's (1988) counter-perspective outlines three further problems with this so-called progressiveness in information societies. First, he argues that vested interests mean access to information technologies favours those who can afford to invest in them. For example, 'the collusion of military with microelectronic interests in the modern world' does not harness mutual communication among different social groups – quite the opposite, these vested interests are 'dedicated to hostile, destructive and lethal ends' (Lyon 1988: 18). Second and related to this first point, capitalist economic interests mean that 'private gain is constantly set against efforts to “socialize” production' (Lyon 1988: 18). Public information providers such as public libraries and public service broadcasters find it increasingly difficult to afford access to certain forms of information in competition with multinational corporations, and the privatization of previously public services such as the telephone network further pushes up prices. And third, the assumption that information society marks a 'natural' progression – following the agricultural
and industrial revolutions - forecloses alternative ways of thinking about contemporary societies, including the starkly alternative Luddite argument that technologies restrict choice and should be (indeed, often are) resisted by individuals. Lyon's theory of information society is situated between optimistic and pessimistic (Luddite) accounts, although he is closer to pessimism than optimism in his later account of a Foucauldian surveillance society (see Lyon 2001).

Manuel Castells's theory of the network society (outlined in three large volumes first published in 1996 and 1997) is closely associated with the concept of the information society but is, in part, a sustained critique of the liberal, optimistic approach. Unlike Toffler, he considers the informational economy of the network society to be overlapping with and penetrating agricultural and industrial economies (informational agriculture, informational manufacturing) rather than replacing them. Castells also differs from Bell in arguing that while information flows within a global economy, 'This is not the same as a world economy' (Castells 1997: 7). While the global economy reaches out to the whole world, it only incorporates the wealthier nations who benefit one another through the technological systems of 'interconnected' global financial markets (Castells 2000: 102). International trade between powerful economies, however, is contrasted with un-networked societies in parts of Africa, South America and rural Asia that remain regionalized and untouched by global economics. The network society is also characterized by a transformation in employment that amounts to the individualization of work (Castells 1997: 9). In contrast to traditional full-time, salaried work closely tied to trade unions, more contemporary developments point to an increase in self-employment, temporary work and the practice of 'subcontracting' labour to specialist consultancies. Rather than create a new class of worker, information-led network societies create new types of employment that fragment or individualize 'labour's bargaining power' (Castells 1997: 10). Small and medium-sized enterprises engage in inter-firm networking - often with much larger businesses - and the inter-dependence between big and small firms largely maintains existing economic and social structures. Individualization of the workforce and the breakdown of the welfare state as a result of weakening trade unions also lead to what Castells identifies as widening social polarization and exclusion.

Castells is not a postmodern theorist per se, although what he calls 'the culture of real virtuality' serves to implicate electronic media in a theory of network society resembling the postmodern. As opposed to virtual reality, real virtuality implies that media texts are not substitutes for real experiences but have 'become the experience' (Castells 2000: 404) in a network society driven by mediated communications. Unlike the mass media age theorized by McLuhan in terms of a 'global village' where 'the medium is the message' (see Chapter 3), Castells argues that by the 1990s multi-media systems and their
power to target diverse audiences mean that 'the message is the medium' (Castells 2000: 368). This change is evident in multinational corporations that take certain messages (content), such as teenage music, and shape them into a niche medium (technological format), such as MTV. Furthermore, the mass media age is obsolete, given the rise of computer-mediated communications – not least the internet – that herald 'increased interaction by and among individuals that break up the uniformity of a mass audience' (Castells 1997: 11). Similar to Toffler's ideas about de-massified media, new media technologies enable the inclusion of different cultural expressions that, in turn, weaken mass media organizations that promote traditional cultural values (Castells 2000: 406). So despite social exclusion and maintenance of the economic status quo, the network society offers sophistication in catering for the diverse cultural traits and identities of those who experience it (see Castells 2004).

This culture of real virtuality carved out by interactive media also radically transforms time and space. Castells refers to 'timeless time' as an outcome of new media and information technologies that aim to annihilate time by compressing years into seconds and breaking 'natural' sequences (i.e. past, present and future). However, timeless time is only available to powerful groups that can, for example, fight and win 'instant wars' with enemies (Castells 2000: 484-91). Elsewhere, societies without new technologies rely on biological or clock time, and the wars they fight last for years. As well as timeless time, what Castells terms 'the space of flows' enable powerful groups – major financial markets, global media, and so on – to engage in distant interactions involving the movement of people and goods. The 'global city', such as New York or London, arises from this space of flows that link up production, management and information. By contrast, un-networked societies 'perceive their space as place-based' (Castells 2000: 453), fixed in a particular locale, and unaffected by the global space of flows in a network society. The notions of timeless time and the space of flows – as Castells acknowledges – are reminiscent of David Harvey's (1989) concept of time-space compression. Contrary to the work of Jameson which marks off postmodernity as a new era in reaction to modernity, Harvey sees continuities between the two. Indeed, 'the changing experience of sense and time had much to do with the birth of modernism' (Harvey 1989: 283). Nevertheless, 'the rapidity of time-space compression in recent years' caused by the pressures of capital accumulation – akin to Castells's interconnected global market economy – is distinctly postmodern and 'exacts its toll on our capacity to grapple with the realities unfolding around us' (Harvey 1989: 305–6). The technological endeavour to tighten time-spans and space-distances for economic gain has catastrophic implications when it hastens the need for quick, unconsidered decision-making in political, military and financial realms.
Ritzer: McDonaldization

It seems appropriate to end this chapter with what is, partly at least, a counter-perspective on postmodernity. George Ritzer suggests that there are more continuities than differences between modernity and a so-called postmodern age. According to Ritzer (1993), we live in a McDonaldized society reminiscent of advanced modernity. This is not to say that McDonald's is a typical feature of social life but that the corporate structure and practices associated with the fast-food chain are symptomatic of wider global production trends – a similar perspective, known as 'Coca-colonization', has a longer tradition (see Nederveen Pieterse 2004: 49). Based on Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy and rationalization, Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis states that the rules, regulations and structures characteristic of a McDonald's-style global corporation are put in place so as to maximize four profit-making concerns:

1. **Efficiency**: this is about being cost-effective and preventing waste. For example, 'The Egg McMuffin is basically an entire breakfast ... combined into one handy sandwich that can be eaten quickly, easily, and without utensils' (Ritzer 1993: 40).

2. **Calculability**: this is about uniformity of size, quantity and production time. So 'great care is taken to be sure that each raw McDonald's hamburger weighs 1.6 ounces, no more, no less ... The precooked hamburger measures precisely 3.875 inches across' (Ritzer 1993: 66).

3. **Predictability**: we expect the same tastes, packaging and people employed to serve us. Predictable ingredients and predictable forms of storage (i.e. freezing) aid this rationalizing process of McDonaldization.

4. **Control**: this is to be found in rigid management structures and huge wholesale purchasing of supplies. Not even the 'chefs' have much control over how the food is delivered to the customer: 'Much of the food prepared at McDonald's arrives at the restaurant preformed, precut, presliced, and preprepared, often by nonhuman technologies' (Ritzer 1993: 105).

These four features of McDonaldization are not only evident within fast-food industries. Ritzer refers to the media and information industries in terms of similar structures and practices of production as McDonald's. Efficiency, for instance, is identifiable in what the author terms 'News McNuggets' (Ritzer 1993: 57–8) – very short stories presented in tabloid newspapers such as USA TODAY and The Sun – in contrast to the more substantial and intellectually challenging reports found in inefficient broadsheets. Calculability is evident
in televised sports such as basketball and football with their uniform time periods which allow for easy programme scheduling and commercial breaks. By contrast, competitive pursuits less constrained by time and calculability – such as chess and mountaineering – are less media-friendly and therefore receive little media coverage. Predictability is an important technique by which the Hollywood film industry constantly searches for remakes, sequels and films based on ‘tried and tested’ formulas. Ritzer (1993: 89) uses the example of Psycho (1960), a box-office hit film which spurned predictable offshoots such as Halloween (1978) and A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984).

Control is evident when politicians and other public figures utilize media training and spin-doctors in their media appearances: ‘Most of [President Ronald] Regan’s TV appearances were carefully managed to be sure that the right message was communicated’ (Ritzer 1993: 117). Like Adorno’s theory of standardization and Boorstin’s concept of pseudo-events, Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis proposes that media and popular culture are starved of originality, creativity and diversity due to the rationalized structures of global capitalist corporations. The main challenge to the McDonaldization thesis is the concept of ‘glocalization’ or global localization, which is based on the premise that ‘corporations only succeed if and to the extent that they adapt themselves to local cultures and markets’ (Nederveen Pieterse 2004: 50; see also Sreberny 2000). The recent Bond film, Casino Royale (2006), may have all the hallmarks of a predictable Hollywood espionage thriller but it had to adapt to the lucrative Chinese market, for example, by renaming the main character ‘Ling ling qi’ – Chinese for 007 (Yahoo! News UK 2007). The importance of localizing global media productions further suggests the persistence of traditional, local ways of life in many aspects of contemporary culture – far from the breakdown of history and tradition associated with postmodernity.

In his original conception of a McDonaldized society, Ritzer argues that global capitalism today is an outcome of modernity rather than postmodernity – an argument clearly at odds with Jameson among other postmodernists. In a sequel to his first book on McDonaldization, however, Ritzer is less hostile to theories of postmodernity and instead refers to ‘the utility of both modern and postmodern theory’ (Ritzer 1998: 132) in our understanding of new means of production and consumption. Ritzer accords with Baudrillard’s view of postmodern society as a consumer society saturated by simulations. Moreover, ‘As a result of the necessity for ever-increasing consumption, the focus of capitalism has shifted from exploiting workers to exploiting consumers’ (Ritzer 1998: 121). This, in part, explains why ‘instead of “real” interactions with servers in fast-food restaurants . . . we can think of these as simulated interactions’ (Ritzer 1998: 121), determined by point-of-sale technologies including the electronic checkouts increasingly ‘employed’ by supermarket chains. These simulated interactions, which we might also
apply to technologies such as video on-demand and internet banking, are now such a routine feature of postmodern life that any sense of real interaction between individuals is lost — indeed, consumed by simulations. Simulated interaction is more real than real, face-to-face interaction. Likewise, the fast food we are encouraged to eat in a consumer capitalist society — McDonald's hamburgers, pizzas, chicken nuggets — is akin to a simulation of 'real', homemade, freshly cooked food that we were once encouraged to consume, before the days of hyperreality. Notwithstanding plasticity, the McDonald's burger has become the 'real' American burger, concealing the really real origins of any authentic, original burger (Ritzer 1998: 122). Mediated advertising and promotional campaigns serve to reinforce this deception. Moreover, the simulated McUniversity — literally realized by CNN Ted Turner's idea of an electronic university (Ritzer 1998: 159) and supported more recently by Google's digitization of millions of academic books and journals — is a postmodern manifestation of McDonaldization in practice.

Summary

This chapter has considered:

- Definitions of postmodernity and postmodernism, including the main features that characterize postmodernity.
- Baudrillard's theory of simulation, including concepts of hyperreality and media saturation as they apply to televised coverage of warfare and other global 'non-events'.
- Postmodern theories of image in relation to 'pseudo-events' (Boorstin) and spectacle in relation to the pseudo-needs of consumerism (Debord).
- Lyotard's theory of the decline of metanarratives — narratives of emancipation and of speculation — and how this theory applies to media metanarratives.
- Information society debates, including competing theories of the post-industrial society (Bell) and the network society (Castells), and ideas about media de-massification and time-space compression.
- The McDonaldization thesis, which both challenges and — in Ritzer's revised version — reaffirms the distinction between modernity and postmodernity.
Further reading


An interesting and amusing account that traces parallels between Baudrillard’s postmodern theories of media and the renaissance enjoyed by McLuhan’s medium theory since the boom in postmodernist perspectives. Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.


An innovative approach to theories of postmodernity that questions postmodern accounts and reaffirms the place of modernity in contemporary media culture. Chapters on ‘declaring the postmodern’ and the information age. Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.


This book presents a social theory of the internet as an interactional community for the transmission of cultural values and information (note that this book is also useful in relation to interactionist perspectives discussed in Chapter 5). Chapters on globalization, regulation and ‘the self’. Suitable for all media students.


A cautious approach to the notion of an ‘information society’ revolution. Media technologies throughout history are seen to have suffered from problems of suppression (particularly economic constraints) and competence. Useful for all media students.