An exploration of contemporary social and cultural phenomena through the lens of postmodernism philosophy

Thesis Sarah Klijsen ceramics department
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Introduction

The postmodern way of thinking brings all kinds of effects to our society. Or does our society effect the way we think about postmodernism itself? We can analyze this by looking at our economy, the way we consume and the way we deal with each other, online and offline. Postmodernism is filled with global consumerism, mass media, hyperrealness, cultural diversity and uncertainty when it comes to politics and our opinions. Its philosophy is known to reject rationality, objectivity, and a universal truth. Many great writers and philosophers have tried to predict the future of this era using their philosophies. Some argue that perhaps we have already moved on to a new era of Neo-modernism. This thesis explores the way social and cultural phenomena are influenced by the zeitgeist of postmodern thinking using different philosophical theories.

This text will dive deeper into some of those theories and explore how contemporary phenomena can still be linked to these postmodern thinkers and what relevance their concepts might still have. Postmodernism is perhaps even the most interesting from a sociological point of view as it raises important questions. How do we interact with each other in a world where most interactions occur digitally? How do we operate within the systems that surround us? What, in fact, happens when rationality and objectivity are abandoned? And what consequences does the lack of a universal truth have on our sense of community or on our political opinions? The rapid progression of the world we live in makes the way we think, behave, and consume change, possibly in an unnatural manner. This causes specific societal phenomena worth looking into; for instance, the role of fast fashion and cancel culture. This thesis takes a deeper dive and explores paradoxes in the structures around us through a critical approach. Is postmodernist thought the cause or the effect of a problem in these phenomena?

This thesis is structured exploring a couple of postmodern philosophers and writers; Jean-Jacques Baudrillard, on simulation and simulacra, as well as the concept of hyperreality, Fredrick Jameson, on our capitalist, consumerist postmodern society, Derrida on the ambiguity of language and ''The Society of the Spectacle'' written by Guy. Different aspects of their theories and how they relate to contemporary cultural and social phenomena will be elaborated upon. This text will examine how these thinkers have influenced the way we view postmodernism and how their texts and concepts have influenced our contemporary society as it has been shaped ever since they were most relevant.

A phenomenon such as cancel culture is one of the topics. This culture is very much still apparent in the society we live in today. But what are the repercussions of such a ''culture''? Is it really a culture or more a behavioral habit? Are we secretly hoping the engagement in cancel culture will start a revolution? And how is cancel culture, in many ways a self-destructing, hypocrite behavior of the human condition?

Another topic that will be touched on is the engagement with nostalgia viewed from a postmodern perspective. Why do we engage with nostalgia evoking content? What effect does this have on our consumption habits in for instance fashion? And where does the need come from to identify ourselves with what and how we consume? What makes us think we must look to the past while having trouble looking forward?

Aside from my interest in philosophy and sociology, these are all topics heavily related to the concept of postmodernism and therefore worthwhile to take a deeper dive into in this thesis.

An introduction to postmodern nostalgia using Baudrillard's ''simulation and simulacra.''

Ever since the pandemic it has become apparent that content on the internet seems to be more nostalgic based than ever. In some connotations nostalgia can be referred to the longing of the past. But in the context of this thesis, it is also referred to the constant occupation with the reviving of the past. Nostalgia is not only occurring on the internet, but also in the products we consume. Maybe the pandemic period of standing still in time has caused us to reflect and long for a past that seemed easier and better. The internet discourse has dubbed this the ''age of nostalgia''. But what defines this age and where do we see this back in our everyday lives? We see this back in, for instance, the revival of film and analog cameras. There has been an upcoming interest in creating this analog aesthetics again, also on social media. Creating posts in a more ''nostalgic'' framework. Images and flashbacks from products and content of our collective childhood. Nostalgia frequently implicates social interaction and can be used to create and to maintain social connections (even if it is with strangers on the internet). And because we all have these shared experiences it makes it easier for peers to find a connection.

As stated above, the subject of nostalgia has seemed to have gotten a greater importance in the last few years. The postmodern ideas and theories used in this thesis give sentimentality greater importance because it emphasizes the fragmentation of experiences. Nostalgia and sentimentality have become a means of connecting to a perceived and more authentic past. It gives more value to these things as objective truths are questioned. Being drawn to the past can be viewed as a way of escaping the complexities and insecurities of the present. The appeal might lie in its sense of stability, as opposed to the fluid and uncertain nature of the present. In this manner, nostalgia can be seen as a form of psychological escape from the challenges of the contemporary world we live in.

Connecting to Baudrillard's philosophy of symbols and their simulation[1]. What we've come to in the post-modern world, he says, is the inability to find a difference between the real and the unreal, "The real," being "not what it used to be". Whereas images and objects were once classically seen as references to a basic and tangible reality, these references have been distorted over time, and are now only self-referential. We constantly get influenced by the signs, symbols, and images around us. Assuming they have an independent existence. Being surrounded and effected by content and images on television networks, cinema and social media posts creates a situation in which the narration of these images become somewhat independent of the narrated event. They become alienated from the ''original'' image. Giving them almost a new identity. One without content. Baudrillard warned us that (social) media is not merely means of communication anymore: they are a shell of representation and simulation of reality. The material world is not a source of inherent truth or meaning. Rather, objects and things are empty and devoid of any inherent significance. In other words, the material world does not contain any hidden or deeper truths; but it is a superficial and meaningless construct. This view challenges traditional understandings of the relationship between objects and their inherent value or significance – a truth that holds nothing. Postmodern nostalgia can be described as the collective longing for an idealized past that is reconstructed and represented through various forms of art and media. This often involves taking historical symbols and imagery and stripping them of their original meaning, then using them to create a romanticized and mythologized version of the past with, or without direct awareness of doing so. Making the nostalgia inherently contradictory. In this way, postmodern nostalgia erases the complexities and realities of history, and instead presents a distorted and idealized version of the past as a "lost object of desire." Movies and television containing nostalgic content restructure the whole ''reality'' of the past and project it into a desperate attempt to reclaim a missing

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[1] Baudrillard, Jean (1981), *Simulacra and simulation,* University of Michigan Press

past is influenced by the changing trends and ideologies of this generation, leading to the reinvention, and repackaging of the past in a way that appeals to current beliefs and values.

''To provide an example of this postmodern phenomenon we can analyze the music of singer Olivia Rodrigo who gained most of her popularity through TV shows (like *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, which is just a repetition of an older series of movies) and over the pandemic with albums like *Sour*. The Ringer writes, "*Sour* is about hating your schoolmates and damning your ex, feeling like nobody understands you and failing at everything from love to math class to parallel parking. Rodrigo draws from the It-Girls-as-outcasts pop canon with [Taylor] Swiftian singer-songwriter stylings, Phoebe Bridgers's languid balladry, Lorde-esque melodrama, and pop-punk melodies à la Paramore." Like most music albums today it is a work of nostalgic montaging, taking popular culture from the past and presenting it again as 'new'.''[2]

The engagement with nostalgia-evoking content on social media fulfills the need for ontological security by reintegrating glamorized memories into a self-affirming narrative. Instead of critically looking at the past, we sentimentalize and cherry pick bits and pieces which can offer comfort. Algorithms and technology have also led to a situation where our experiences and perceptions are largely shaped by artificial constructs. The consequence: a situation where people are increasingly searching for tangible, authentic experiences and connections in a world that is dominated by mediated and simulated experiences. We have become desperate in a hunt for the 'real', a sentimental search for the tangible amid a sea of broken representations.

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[2] https://medium.com/@nicholasadiaz7/introducing-mark-fisher-part-2-the-slow-cancellation-of-the-future-postmodern-culture-1f9ed51280b8

Jameson's concept of pastiche in late capitalism

In his book "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" Fredrick Jameson wrote on the capitalization and consuming of postmodern space and nostalgia. He paints a dystopian picture to what he sees as loss of our collective connection to history.
In chapter 9, called ''nostalgia for the present'' he dives into different aspects of our culture. He states in this chapter that postmodernity has transformed the historical past into a series of deflated stylizations. Jameson calls this ''pastiche''. He examines the cultural landscape of postmodernism that is shaped by capitalism and how pastiche operates in this postmodernist framework. [3]

But what is the difference between a pastiche and a simulacrum then? While they both involve elements of imitation and replication, they differ from each other in some aspects. The biggest difference between the two would be that a simulacrum is a more complex term rooted in philosophy. A simulacrum can be a direct imitation of reality by using a copy for representing this reality for instance. Also referring to the ''hyperreal'', what will be elaborated later in this thesis. The direct distinction between reality and these representations becomes blurred. A simulacrum has thus become more than a mere imitation of reality but rather reality has been replaced by the mimics. Whether a pastiche can make the same references but without trying mimic reality by using different representations. It does borrow certain elements and styles but uses these to morph into a new creation. Rather than a simulacrum, pastiche does not seek to replace the original. It rather pays an homage or a parody to create something new. An example is the occurrence of certain fashion trends borrowing and imitating styles from the past. This will be elaborated on later in this chapter. In this context some of the postmodern nostalgia can also be a pastiche.

Jameson's philosophies created a new depth, one that finds its continuity both in modern "theory" and in a completely new image or simulacrum. In this, depth can also be understood quite literally. For instance, the black flat screens of our mobile devices or skyscrapers mirroring windows holding secret to what is inside. It manifests itself in the postmodern rejection of looking at (historical) context. It is important to remember the past to understand how it affects the present. Without any sense the of past, present, and future, the general sense of history disappears. Thus, without being able to make this distinction we lose the capacity to preserve our own live as ''lived''. Unending change wipes out traditions and transforms reality into images and fragments time into a series of never-ending present times. In this existential present, the past becomes idealized and self-referential. It can only be portrayed in a vague notion of ''pastness''. Resulting in a whole new creation of aesthetics. This artificial effect replaces the ''real history''. The aesthetic becomes recognizable as a general ''nostalgic mode of reception''. The possible resulting effect: nostalgia being more easily digestible for consumers.

Jameson uses schizophrenia as a construct to explain this phenomenon. He explains that postmodernism cannot be a cultural style by itself but will always be an opposite reaction to Modernism with a set of died out classics. With the depth in narratives and structures Modernism brought, postmodernism's structures are disrupted, and everything seems to be in a disconnected state. Jameson argues that this disjointedness and cultural fragmentation is the same as someone experiences in a schizophrenic state.

An example is the reviving of 80s and 90s trends like the resurgence of vinyl records. Just like the comeback of the analog photograph mentioned earlier. In older and younger generations, the use of vinyl records has become popular again. A symptom of this is the resurrection of the collector's mentality. It reflects a desire for tangible objects in a digitalizing world. Marketing from musical artists try to capitalize on this as well. The record shops are full of old classics, but it has become quite common for

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[3] Jameson, Fredric (1991), *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Duke University Press

contemporary music artists to release a vinyl whenever they release a new album on Spotify. It could be seen as an honoring of the tradition of vinyl. It seems like with the revival of these trends we so desperately try to grasp back to a certain romantic aesthetic is seemingly used to have.

Commodification of the famous in relation to postmodernism

In this capitalist society, businesses try to play into this nostalgia by commodifying and repackaging nostalgic elements for economic gain. Brands play into this collective nostalgia by appealing their products to multiple generations. This engagement encourages consumers to participate through sharing memories and creating content. Retro and vintage trends are an obvious example of how postmodern nostalgia is applied in the consumption of memories. With literally consuming, engaging, and reinterpreting products from the past. This engaging with nostalgia filled products can also trigger emotional responses and brands try to capitalize on this. And thus, creating promoting consumption through marketing. One of the ways they play into this market is through ''blanding''. Brands rebrand themselves or new brands start up with a model of what they think is attractive to the consumer. Thus, creating only the same type of layouts of brands and marketing strategies. Resulting in brands that have no personality and the consuming of the same thing we already know because it feels comfortable.

Flattened out experiences and cultural languages suffer under the result of the postmodern condition. Jameson argues, this can then be commodified and consumed. With the fall of the communist system, it was argued that no other system would work other than the capitalist system. The result, he says, would then be capitalist thinking over all other forms of thought. According to Jameson the postmodern way of thinking helps capitalism. He explains that postmodernists don't think there's one objective truth that exists outside of the culture we're part of. Everything that is understood is influenced by our beliefs and the way we communicate.

Following this economic base of thinking about postmodernity, Jameson proceeds to pinpoint several symptoms that he associates with the postmodern condition. One of these being the ''the waning affect''. He notes that emotion has not disappeared from the postmodern age but that it is affected, it has become a caricature of itself based on the expectations of the observer. He goes further into this by describing the waning affect as a process in which the subject can't differentiate the continuity between past, present, and future. And to think of its existence into one coherent experience in time. Leading to a superficial engagement with these timelines.

The effect of commodification, for instance with movie stars, (but now also social media influencers) is that they are commodified into their own images. With the rapid speed the digital age progresses with applications like TikTok and Instagram this has now also become a culture among the mainstream crowd. Through these platform people present themselves as brands. Thus, the rise of so many social media influencers, but also ''regular'' people presenting themselves as products online. Everybody can become a product of themselves by curating their identities. Think about website like OnlyFans or people paying to see other people live-stream on Instagram or TikTok. With the rise of the global economy the consumer and employee were made insignificant, reduced to statistical numbers. People began playing a smaller part in this age of faceless corporations. He states how the crisis of this alienation can result in the fragmentation of the subject or ''Death of the subject''.

Commodity fetishism and postmodern nostalgia

Commodity fetishism, as explained through Marxist theory, also ties into the commodification of postmodern nostalgia in multiple ways. The commodification of postmodern nostalgia shifts the attention from true historical context and significance to surface level objectification. The focus on objects and consuming becomes much greater. This leads to a consumer-driven society where there is a need of creating identity through the imagery and products consumed, as explained earlier through Jameson's theory of pastiche. Both Marxist theory and postmodern nostalgia play into the focus on objects, emotions, and consumption at the expense of the real, the truth, the history and accuracy. This consumption-driven society often completely disregards the understanding of labor and creation of products. The awareness of the question; ''what do we consume?'' gets ignored and set aside.

(Fast) fashion and trend cycles

The speed in which our digital landscape has developed has led to shorter trend cycles. Meaning that trends come up very fast and go out of style even faster. A prime example of this is the fashion trend cycles. The speed of fashion trends going in and of out style has become so rapid that brands try to keep up by producing clothes that are ''in style'' at the same pace. For an example we must trace back a few years. In fashion for instance, since 2020 we've seen the rise and decline of 70s fashion, after that 80s, 90s and now in 2023 we've entered a new ''old'' fashion era: Y2K. Where everything of the 2000s in fashion and culture is glorified. The cute low-rise jeans and miniskirts are in again, completely disregarding the effect the low-rise jeans had in the actual 2000s (which was the normalization of extremely skinny belly's). The rapid pace of these (micro) trends lead to an overproduction of products resulting in more consumption but also resulting in more waste.

Mark Fisher spoke about this topic "Fashion is another example: it seems to be stuck, they're cyclically re-modernizing old styles. It is not even fashion as it used to be." Now, a common criticism I have encountered of this observation is that "fashion has always been cyclical,"[4] but this is not what Fisher is contesting. What Fisher claims is that today all we really have in the mainstream *is* cyclical fashion. Yes, people in the 70s would sometimes wear 50s clothes because of so-called fashion cycles, but, nevertheless, the 70s did develop its own style. This is not what we are seeing today where large fashion companies like Levi's, for example, are launching massive 70s-themed campaigns, repeating old styles and cultural forms instead of innovating 'the new', and where millions are buying from them because of their nostalgic attachment to the past.

Postmodernism argues that everything is depthless and happening simultaneously. An example and concern of this is the debate that subcultures supposedly have died out, or rather the subcultures are we know them. Whereas formerly subcultures like punk, metalheads, goths and skaters that were prominent in the 1980s and 1990s used to exist depending on both the time and place you were living in. Anyone anywhere can take on the ''aesthetics'' of all these different subcultures and combine them according to personal preference because of the possibilities provided on the internet. Therefore, not saying the style choices of these subcultures don't exist anymore but rather that they all exist at the same time. Making the definitions of subcultures blurred and less defined. '' "Subcultures" are no longer the preserve of the countercultural – they *are* culture.''[5] Said Yomi Adegoke, in a 2021 article for Vogue magazine. The result of this accessibility on the internet if that these style choices are more quickly co-opted by the mainstream. Speeding up the process of trend-cycles rapid as mentioned before.

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[4] https://www.vox.com/the-goods/23065462/trends-death-subcultures-style
[5] https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/yomi-adegoke-subcultures

Postmodern commodification and nostalgia in art through Jameson

Jameson understood that (postmodern) "theory" had taken a new discourse and would be marked as the end of philosophy. He states that in postmodernity, stylistic innovation is no longer possible. And, as mentioned before, argues that all there is left to do is imitate dead styles and speak dead languages. Like what we see happening in fashion. Similarly, to Baudrillard and his simulacra theory, everything becomes alienated from the real and tangible. Because contemporary art has shifted with these postmodern changes. It can no longer exist in a way art used to, by conveying a certain expression of the artist in the work. Because it has become so depended on commodity production and linked to changes in style, contemporary art can no longer exist outside of the system. Nor, in a real way rebel against it while being part of it. Art's only purpose is to recycle and reuse because nothing can be ''new'' anymore without it being immediately being commodified, Jameson agues.

Furthermore, he explains with the concept of expression, he presupposes a model of inside and outside where the distinction between ones inner and outside world and the individual person as a single monad. But when we look at postmodern artists such as Andy Warhol's ''*Marylin*'' we can hardly speak of any expression in the artwork. That is because, Jameson states; postmodernism rejects traditional models of depth. It could be argued that a shift in the artworld must be realized to ''break out'' of this. But what exactly this entails is still uncertain. From personal experience I have witnessed myself that the discourse in the art world with this ''lack of expression'' is already shifting. Noticeable with the reemergence of craftsmanship together with the importance of materiality in contemporary art, especially, for instance, in the field of ceramics.

Guy Debord's ''society of the spectacle'' in a capitalist driven society

The Society of the Spectacle, written by Guy Debord, discusses how people have become immensely technology-driven in this age that we forget how to live through our current experiences. The link with postmodern nostalgia is, in my opinion quite clear. Debord debates the amount technology should be used for. He was not entirely against it but objected to the use of technology for economic gain. Debord looks at the link between mass media and the economy by looking into Marxist philosophy on alienation and commodity fetishism. Debord states that media and marketing actively alter both human perception as well as their interactions and relationship. As discussed earlier, we live in a digital world that is ruled by fake-news and ''post truth'' where, through the spreading of all this disinformation, it becomes harder to differentiate between real and falsehood. The news circles around for a day only to be replaced again by the newer and more spectacular headlines of tomorrow. This makes it even harder to stay involved and invested in one subject. It is interesting to me that Debord wrote this book 1967 but the subject is this very relevant today. Because everything in our digital world is wired to be easy for use, we forget how to form our own human interactions. Especially with everything being commoditized in a capitalist driven society. Think about for instance the use of Google Maps. You can find the route to any destination on there. And instead of asking for directions, we now are only dependent on our devices to show us the way. But Debord argues in his book ''there must be disinformation, and it must be something fluid and potentially ubiquitous.'' At the same time Debord criticizes the passivity the spectacle encourages. The Society of the Spectacle criticizes that in a world where the spectacle roams free to create disinformation and a false sense of satisfaction, it will prevent the individual from realizing their true potential. Doing this by creating control through manipulation by commodifying desires and experiences.[6]

Authority, monitoring and consumerism through the eyes of The Society of the Spectacle

How does consumerism work in an age where the spectacle is so prominent in today's social media culture? In a society with historical amnesia; where depth and history are brushed under the rug, it is hard to see a future with any transformative potential. This is also the reason big industrial companies keep getting away with the pollution of the environment. They might even be praised by the corporate owned media for playing their marketing in a way that claims the opposite. This is called greenwashing; the companies claim to be more responsible and sustainable, and they portray themselves as ''environmentally conscious'' despite not taking (enough) action to reduce their carbon footprint. They use The Spectacle to claim to be conscious by manipulating the public.

Social media has taken a form that could signal the death of democratic freedom. Of course, this statement is not as black and white as stated. But in a world where capital reigns over individuality this could be a very realistic consequence of the situation. Because in these circumstances it is impossible to do anything other than for the means of capital and economic gain. The sharing of personal information has become normalized. The spectacle emphasizes and characterizes through constant display of images and information the notion of surveillance capitalism; the idea that individual privacy will be compromised and maybe decline all together by turning personal information into a commodity for profit. Capital is put above the need of personal privacy. Because of the normalization of sharing personal information the idea of constant surveillance practices has also become a common practice. All personal information is available to anyone at any time. Companies use personal data in marketing strategies for their targeted audience. This also encourages the idea that trading personal information is

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[6] Debord, Guy (1967), *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books

reasonable to participate in digital culture. And because we identify more and more through the products we consume; it becomes a trade we make to be able to form our identities. And thus, the only way we can find community is through consuming the same things and relating to a community build on consuming the same product. For instance, fan-bases of big celebrities who all consume the same (gossip) content about this person.

Debord suggested ways we could separate ourselves from the phenomena mentioned above. Of course, this separation is easier said than done. Debord argued that existing images and other cultural artifacts could be repurposed and used in a new context, changing their meaning. The word he used for this was the French word ''Détournement'', meaning to hijack, reroute, or quite literally; to flip around. For instance, taking cultural images and symbols from mainstream media and using them to convey alternative or other critical ideas, usually done in an artistic manner to challenge or critique dominant power structures in society, as Debord and the Situationists did. In contemporary art, the same is done in a radical way and is often used for activism purposes to disrupt the status quo.

Détournement seems quite similar to pastiche as they both involve the appropriation and reinterpretation of cultural elements to construct something new. Though it is important in this context to highlight the key factors in which détournement distinguishes itself from pastiche. The main difference is the manner in which they serve different purposes. While pastiche mostly serves the purpose of paying tribute or to imitate, détournement aims to subvert original meaning.

As mentioned before, Debord was not inherently against technology. But he did try to warn us about the consequences of the digitalization of society. For instance, that capital will become more important above all other needs such as individual privacy and the disappearance of autonomic thinking. He recognized that digital tools can be helpful in our day to day lives but warned of the dangers of becoming too dependent on them; of people giving away their free agency and becoming the commodified product of a capitalist society. And of surveillance capitalism becoming a tool to control people's behavior, digitally but eventually also in real life, through the constant monitoring of choices people make online, where they spend their money, what websites they visit etc. This surveillance is also a key point in cancel culture, which we'll be diving into in a later chapter. In the end, Debord also wants us to recognize that we still have agency to make our own informed decisions.

An example of such agency is the writers' strike in Hollywood that started on the 2nd of May 2023. Screenplay- and story writers from all kinds of movie and tv productions simultaneously protested. The strike was mainly due to low minimum wages for actors and writers. But the interesting thing about this strike was the role Ai played in the matter. SAG-AFTRA, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists brought out a statement that they, together with Netflix, were planning on using actor identities for Ai manipulation for use in productions without rightful compensation. This of course would have huge repercussions for the people working in the industry involved. "They propose that our background performers should be able to be scanned, get paid for one day's pay and their company should own that scan, their image, their likeness, and to be able to use it for the rest of eternity in any project they want with no consent and no compensation," Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, chief negotiator for the actors' union, SAG-AFTRA, said.''[7] Furthermore, they threatened that the writers who oversaw writing screenplay and scripts and texts etc. would be partly replaced by programs like Chatgpt and other generative Ai to take over the job of writing. Consequently, these people would be put out of work and thus scripts and storylines of film and television would lack depth and human empathy. After all, Ai will only reproduce what it already knows from the data available on the internet. It will reconstruct, but never create something entirely new. Movies will thus only be produced for the interest

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[7] https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/18/business/ai-actors-strike/index.html#

of gaining capital by fast production and consumption. The general fear of the people in the industry is: the art of film production will be lost.

What people working in Hollywood were afraid of had already become real by the launch of the new magazine Copy. Copy was launched august 2023 as the first fully Ai generated fashion magazine. The models as well as the garments are fully made by Ai and are a recreation of already existing pieces. This considerably reduces the labor costs of creating a magazine, as less people are needed to design garments. But the magazine has faced a lot of critique ever since it was launched. Vogue magazine published an article raising questions of the ethics of this magazine. And the effects it has on the creation of new, innovative, and original collections in fashion. The Vogue article argued Copy was a cosplay of a ''real'' high fashion magazine, showing their bias against Copy's Ai for creating models with a male-gazey look. Even the editorial director and founder of the Copy magazine, Carl-Axel Wahlström, has spoken out about the boundaries Ai operates in when it comes to the innovation and creating of truly ''new'' designs[8]. He confirmed that Ai will always be recreating the information it already has and thus will never be able to operate in a creative field that requires a certain creativity only a human touch can fabricate.

Although not intended this way, the example above can be seen as détournement. It used existing images to create something new, but the outcome brought about a strong critique on copying designs in the fashion world and it provoked a lot of people in the industry. However, perhaps the magazine's aim was to pay tribute to the existing designs in the industry, making pastiche seem applicable.

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[8] https://www.vogue.com/article/exactly-what-is-copy-the-first-ai-powered-fashion-magazine-trying-to-prove

Evolution of language in a contemporary context

Can language be a pastiche or simulacrum?

There's a clear connection between Jameson's pastiche and the buzzwords being used in the current digital landscape. Think about the infamous three G's. A play on live, love, laugh is now the ''woke'' version of gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss. The way language and cultural elements are intertwined in both cases is characteristic of postmodernity. Regarding the origin of these words, a simulacrum can also be applied.

While pastiche involves the merging and imitation of multiple cultural elements, making it unclear to see the origins, a simulacrum is the distortion and the detachment of the original meaning. This leads to a state Baudrillard calls ''hyperreality''. In a postmodern context, both of these concepts play a role in the complex relationship between reality, representation and culture. As such, the concept of pastiche can also be applied to language. The meaning of certain words as they are currently used both online and offline is detached from their original meaning. Take the word 'gaslighting' for instance. Its original meaning stems from a 1930s movie named ''gas light'' where a woman is being lied to, manipulating her sense of reality. But the title merely refers to the headlights of a car. Today, the movie title is used as a verb to refer to the manipulation of someone's perception of reality. It has become an umbrella term to refer to lying or creating confusion or misguidance. There is an irony in this; taking this meaning into a postmodern context, manipulation can be seen as a pastiche itself. Both gaslighting and pastiche create a distorted reality by borrowing facts from ''the real'' to create an alternative narrative.

Both pastiche and the language used in these concepts share traits of superficiality, appropriation, and the distorting of context. We know postmodernism encourages simplified language and borrows cultural elements which results in a lack of depth and a genuine understanding of its context and original meaning.

Ambiguous language

The phenomenon of cancel culture is all about creating a spectacle by public shaming. It is about creating a riot online often using buzzwords that are simplified from their complex meaning and origin. Nuance and understanding of such concepts are these days often dismissed. Cancel culture has the tendency to separate individuals from each other as well as diminish the willingness to be open for discussion, detaching them from authentic human connections. This tendency of alienation in cancel culture mirrors Debord's description of the spectacle.

Language changes noticeably with the rapid change of the social climate. Words like ''toxic'' are thrown around for everyone expressing a controversial opinion. The term ''toxic'' has become a heavy label to put on someone else. Other buzzwords being used a lot in the context of cancel culture are the infamous three g's touched upon earlier: gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss. Especially gaslighting and gatekeeping are terms that are often used in the process of cancellation, as gatekeeping means purposely withholding information and general access to something. Girlboss refers to a woman creating empowerment and taking charge of her own life, often on a career-based level.

Another social and cultural phenomenon relating to postmodernism thought is therapy speak. The notion therapy speak is the (over) use of words in therapeutic discourse, for instance by psychologists. These words have been so incorporated in our everyday use of language that the nuance of certain concepts or diagnosis have disappeared. The over usage of these terms may dilute their meaning. Some of these words are also interwoven in the language used in cancel culture. Think about gaslighting, but also words like 'traumatizing', 'red flags', and the diagnostic term 'narcissist'. A reason for this can be the growing

awareness of mental health these last years, especially since the pandemic. More people have been going to therapy and applying these words in their everyday use of language. The result: people are starting to act like therapists by coopting this language and diagnosing others and themselves, applying therapeutic terms loosely, especially on social media.

Postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote about this deconstruction of language. While his philosophy is not explicitly integrated into therapy speak, there are clear parallels to be drawn. Just like in therapy speak he emphasized the idea that language and words are not stable, they are ambiguous, ever evolving and do not have fixed meanings. When it comes to therapy speak, language is often deconstructed in this manner.

The dangerous consequences of this, among other things, is that this usage of language can come off as insensitive to the people who are rightfully diagnosed. ''These words suggest a sort of woke posturing, a theatrical deference to norms of kindness, and they also show how the language of suffering often finds its way into the mouths of those who suffer least.'' Said Katy Waldman in an article from the New Yorker.

Cancel culture relating to postmodernism

During my research I found it is important to highlight the overlap between contemporary phenomena that occur online in addition to real life and the theories of these postmodern thinkers. One prominent ''symptom'' of postmodernism is cancel culture. First is important to know how cancel culture possibly originated. Let's explore how it shaped the (digital) landscape of the 21st century.

Cancel culture (or call-out culture), originated somewhere in between the late 2010s and the early 2020s with the rise of the internet which caused political speech to move online. Cancelling entails a sort of ''social death'' as a consequence of controversial action or statements. Cancel culture is mostly associated with negative connotations and is used a lot in the debate on censorship and free speech. As a result of being offended by a controversial statement or action, groups of people can speak out, cancelling and boycotting individuals, groups, or corporations, both online and in the real world. For those being cancelled this can lead to a loss of reputation, loss of income and even hate crimes. Cancelling most frequently takes place on social media. Due to the anonymous nature, individuals can hide behind their accounts, making it easier to express opinions or hate comments as they don't have to face the opposite party. X (previously Twitter) is a platform often used for this. Cancel culture often revolves around topics such as race, gender theories and identity politics. A prominent example of a movement that contributed to cancel culture is the #MeToo movement. Where predominantly women used the hashtag MeToo to call out their abusers in positions of privilege and power.

Is Cancel Culture a symptom of postmodernism?

Much of the ''culture'' part of cancel culture is based in postmodernist thought. It can be seen as a symptom of postmodernism. However, it is important to note that while it does relate to notions of truth, identity, power dynamics and communication, postmodernism does not have *all* its aspects tied to cancel culture as postmodernism itself is and stays a complex concept.

With the move of identity politics, discussions and controversial speech into the digital sphere, the distinction was made clearer between what differentiates hate speech from free speech. Free speech is a right we all have and thus will always be protected. A reaction to this could have been that individuals online started deciding what would constitute as hate speech. Both in postmodernism as well as in cancel culture language is seen with the idea that meaning is subjective and always context dependent. Cancel culture shares this belief in the way that it involves the scrutinizing of language and focusing on context and experience. Both raise concern for manipulation and encourage the adaptation and fluidity of language for the reshaping of certain social and digital discourse. In both meaning is always subjective. As mentioned earlier; ''you have your truth and I have mine''. This is something that is quite recognizable for cancel culture in the online discourse of apps like X (Twitter) and Instagram. To this extent ''the truth'' can get fragmentated. The result is that the idea of an absolute, objective truth gets challenged. Thus, the line between what is considered offensive or not is blurred because issues are approached from several perspectives. This increasingly leads to clashes between different groups as their ''truths'' get more alienated over time. In a political sense, this has lead to more extreme friction between left and right in the discussion of issues like climate change or the regulation of military weapons and actions. This is already noticeable in the contemporary political climate in for instance the United States but also in the Netherlands.

Michel Foucault argued that knowledge was only produced and served in the interest of the ones benefitting from the existing power structures. [9]He said that the ones who weren't a part of this elite (those who are not part of any kind of minority group and living from an above middle-class income) would always be excluded and oppressed in that power dynamic. The postmodern critique argues that in a patriarchal western society the power establishment was predominantly for the white, male and heterosexuals. Postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida argues this as well. Those who do not fit this description are thus considered to be oppressed by the elite. The way our language is formed also carries the risk of oppressing and re-oppressing those minority groups. Unwittingly using cancel speech that does not generally benefit the support of cultural minorities, speakers can be canceled for their offensive speech. Even when they did not intend to offend, their speech can easily be classified as hate-speech in contemporary postmodern cancel culture.

Canceling can be seen as a sort of cultural boycott. From a desire for control and a challenge for moral and cultural order. As I explained earlier; people want to see other people be held accountable for their actions or statements. An example of this boycotting because of cancelling is the brand, Brandy Melville.

Brandy Melville is a fast-fashion clothing brand that originated in the 1970s. The brand wove itself into popular mainstream fashion for a long while. But despite making a huge revenue every year, the brand has been under fire for these past couple of years for allegedly being built on exploitation and discrimination. You could even argue that the brand has been ''cancelled'' multiple times. But why exactly? Brandy Melville has been marketing with a quite specific strategy. It claims to be ''one size fits all''. But of course, there are so many different bodies. No brand can claim such a thing. Despite this the brand markets towards a specific group, this being young teenage girls or women. It has been called out for that the one size does, in fact, not fit all. It fits only skinny white, small breasted, cis female bodies. The brand has been under fire for this a long time because by this marketing it can indirectly claim that this is the ''standard'' desired body-type. And with the growing identity politics in the online discourse people have been speaking out about this more and more. Individuals with different body types feel excluded from the certain style Brandy Melville markets. Besides all this, with the rise of cancel culture, former employees have been more comfortable with speaking out about the toxicity in the work environment the brand offers. Black people and people that do not fit the stereotype marketed body, have been discriminated on the work floor or have even been denied a job even though they fit the qualities the job description offered. Luca Rotondo, a former vice president of the brand even confirmed these claims in an interview with Insider.

Hyperreality and cancel culture

It was explained earlier, using Baudrillard's terminology, how the concept of hyperreality is rooted in postmodern philosophy. It discusses the unclarity of the origin, blurring the distinctions between representation and truth. The postmodern concept of hyperreality is also applicable to cancel culture. Evidently the blurring of reality in cancel culture makes the truth indistinguishable from the original context. After all, there are multiple truths according to postmodern thought. Cancel culture thrives in online spaces and social media plays a big role in the creation of the ''hyperreal''. On social media, things like images and language get more easily detached from their original context as information spreads rapidly and responses become more intense and polarized. It becomes more plausible to take these out of context and magnify hyperreal aspects. The created simulations and media can shape a new perception of reality by manipulating the representation of actual events. Often this causes misinterpretations leading to overreactions, which is characteristic of cancel culture. It can hence be seen as a symptom of the creation of a hyperreality.

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[9] https://iep.utm.edu/fouc-pol/

Hyperreality can additionally play a role in the way a cancelled individual is perceived. It is a possibility that the identity of the person being cancelled gets overshadowed by the negative associations created around their image. Hyperreal representations so to say. A hyperreal image gets constructed around these individuals by the media. This resonates with the idea on how in postmodernism the media constructs reality. Causing them to only exist in a space with a hyperreal perception of them. The meaning and objective truths gets challenged and distortion of perception get assumed as ''the truth''. The danger of this is that individuals can therefore get targeted based on a representation of them, leaving the context out of the question.

Another example of how hyperreality manifests itself in contemporary cultural phenomena is the use of Deepfakes. It allows to create an Ai sculptured persona from something nonexistent using audio and video images. It creates a deceptive purpose making it hard to distinguish reality. It questions what is real and what is not just like postmodern philosophy. It shows a transience never seen before, making it harder to distinguish between real and fake news. This illustrates the way hyperreality and the fluidity of self-presentation manifests itself in the digital world.

The effects of an online culture

Other than the fear of expressing oneself, the nature of cancel culture has more negative effects on people. There has been a lot of criticism on the concept already. Because cancelling entails the desire of accountability and social activism for injustices, it is often expected to pick a side. This can lead to polarization. It enforces the need to distinctively take a side, making it harder to find common ground with the opposite. But for a cohesive society, compromises must be made. This ''us vs them'' mentality makes this more difficult. It can also push people to more extreme ideologies. As seen now with the radicality of the left and right. Important political issues may get sidetracked due to the nature of cancel culture. The drama that online cancelling causes can overshadow the important discussions on social injustices and nuanced thinking and thus, preventing meaningful dialogue.

Currently noticeable on social media is that is it challenging to climb the social ladder again after one's been publicly shamed through cancellation. The polarizing nature of cancel culture leaves little room for forgiveness.

Recently the reactions on cancel culture have been mixed. There is a risk to be cancelled for anyone and everyone that is visible on social media, especially for public figures. Making a public statement or expressing (controversial) opinions is riskier than ever. Even if the intent of the action or statement wasn't to offend anyone. Mostly those on the political left seem to find it necessary to expose systemic injustices. The risk that cancel culture brings is the self-policing of what is considered wrong, oppressive, or inappropriate. But different (minority) groups have their own understanding of what is inappropriate.

Looking at cancel culture through the lens of Guy Debord, both a parallel and a paradox becomes visible. Both détournement and cancel culture share the critiquing of cultural and social elements in society. Although both can be quite radical in their execution, détournement specifically offers an alternative way of critiquing than the immediate seeking of justice of cancel culture, instead challenging in a humane and artistic manner.

The manner in which cancel culture operates now isn't revolutionary and has failed to drive systemic change, as it operates in a rather hypocritical manner. It focusses on accountability as a main principle, while doing so from the safety and unaccountability of anonymity. Of course, the effects of cancel

culture aren't all negative; it has effectively shone a spotlight on social and economic issues. But the way it has, is dubious.

Conclusion

Formulating a conclusion can be hard with a topic purely based on theories and their predictions. Especially in a philosophical context. We can conclude that we are still very much a society operating in a postmodernist era. Though many contemplate we have moved passed this. Trend circles will always come and go and operate in a certain manner. But it has been established that in the past few years nostalgia has had a bigger influence on this and the way we consume. Our collective longing for the past has grown bigger because of the rapid pace in which we move into the future. While simultaneously craving for everything to stay the same and to dissolve in nostalgia's sweet melancholy. Resulting in (over) consumption of products that we identify through. The texts of the postmodern philosophers and writers used in this thesis are still relevant and applicable today. Only they may apply differently in the context of our digitally evolved world. With the use of AI and the role of social media for instance.

In summary both Baudrillard and Jameson's theories are still applicable in today's society. Jameson stated that everything in postmodern context has become a caricature of itself. We still see this in (fashion) trends that are trying to capture the essence of earlier trends by borrowing cultural elements. Resulting in a way which frames them like deflated stylizations of what they once were. Which Jameson calls pastiche. Pastiche can today still be applied in the manner in which our language evolves and new labels are invented. Borrowing cultural elements and constructing them in a new context.

Although the Society of the spectacle was written in 1967, there is still an overlap in the way our society has shaped now. Especially when looked at the development of capitalism and the effect it has on our desire of hyper individualism. Guy Debord saw the danger in the developments of technology and the effects it would have on consumers.

Therapy speak highlights the way we take diagnosis and terms out of context resulting in the disappearance of nuance the more generally known certain psychological terms become. These terms have been coopted in mainstream language usage and are applied a lot in online discourse as well as in cancel culture. The phenomenon of cancel culture was elaborated on using Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. Baudrillard explained hyperreality as the impossibility to describe the real from a simulation of reality. Explained was that hyperreality can root easily and especially online in a technological advanced society like the one that we live in. We've ultimately seen this happen in the development of, for instance, Ai technology. The cause of cancel culture is well intended but in the end not as effective, quite hypocritical, and maybe not as revolutionary as we thought it would be.

While having studied a few of these cultural and social phenomena through the postmodern I concluded not everything has its desired effect. In some cases, for instance in historical context, nuance and fact are extremely important. In other cases, a focus on everyone's individual experience might be more dominant. It is important to find a balance when it comes to our melancholy of the past and our realistic look to the future. This leaves us with the question of what change will need to happen to find this balance?

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