

UDC 316.3

## INTERPRETING THE POSTMODERN SELF

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*The article interprets one of the best comparisons undertaken by western humanities. It tries to explain what it means to be a postmodern self through opposing it to the self of modernity.*

**Key words:** postmodernism, modernity, postmodern self, Christianity

There are a lot of books and articles in literary studies about modernity and postmodernism. They give definitions, provide examples and do their best to explain the meaning of the terms 'modernity' and 'postmodernism'. But they usually overlook what it means to be a postmodern self. The aim of our article is to explore and explain the meaning of the term 'postmodern self' as it is seen by eminent scholars. Presumably, in order to do this, it can be helpful to use the comparative method that has proved to be very productive. It is also wise to use A. Thiselton's strategy presented in his "Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self" and compare it with the self of modernity.

Fuelled by the Enlightenment era, the self of modernity was very optimistic 'about the capacities of human reason, governmental or social strategies and scientific achievements, to shape the world for the general advancement of human society' [1, p.12]. However, such optimism was too naïve. History has shown that reason has fallen short of expectations of the age of Enlightenment. Scientific achievements and advanced technologies are not able to make the world a better place. Moreover, the progress can lead to new problems and sometimes even to real disasters and crises. The Second World War, the Holocaust, aggression accompanied by the use of nuclear weapons just a few examples of such disasters. As a result, modernity with its very optimistic view of capacities of human reason has been replaced by postmodernism.

The question about the status of postmodernism is still open and much debated. While some philosophers consider it to be a new stage of development, that put an end to modernity, others view it as a specific or even degenerate phase of modern era. All of them agree though that whatever position we choose, one thing remains clear about postmodernism and that is the loss of innocence [1, p.12].

To understand the meaning of the loss of innocence, it is wise to refer to Norman K. Denzin and his work "Images of Postmodern Society" [2]. According to the American professor of sociology, postmodernism implies 'a shattering of innocent confidence in the capacity of the self to control its own destiny and signals a loss of truth in global strategies of social planning, and in universal criteria of rationality' [1, p.11]. It is also 'a set of emotional experiences defined by resentment, anger, alienation, anxiety, poverty, racism, and sexism' [2, vii].

The postmodern self then is described as one 'which has been caught up in the attitudes and suspicions of postmodernism' [1, p.11]. And according to Norman K. Denzin this self 'embodies the multiple contradictions of postmodernism, while experiencing itself through the everyday performances of gender, class, and racially-linked social identities' [2, vii]. Thus, it doesn't face the world with trust anymore but faces it with suspicion.

The self of postmodern era is suspicious of everything and especially of the issue of truth. While it was very common for the self of modernity to believe in our ability to know truth about ourselves and our world, the postmodern self considers any truth-claims largely as manipulation and devices to legitimate some or other interests. What is more, everyone seems to be a passive victim of competing interests. As a result the postmodern self no longer perceives itself like an active agent who has control over its own destiny [1, p.12].

There are many things which contribute to the collapse of confidence in claims to truth. One of them is bureaucracy that constantly demonstrates the self-contradictory character of the postmodern self. Thus, while claiming 'to retain a supposedly impartial role as arbitrator for the common good' it still makes its presence felt because of its suspicions about competing manipulative interests [1, p.12]. As for ordinary people, they treat the bureaucrats as power-seeking people who want to control and dominate the enterprises and society instead of serving them.

It is also mass advertising that elevates suspicion and the feeling of being manipulated at every turn. Understanding that many people are skeptical of brands and see in all their truth-claims only the disguised desire for success, some advertisements refuse polished methods. Instead, they unmask their desires in a funny and self-deprecating way, making an impression that there is no disguise and manipulation. Now self-mockery is that which helps brands to achieve their success [1, p.12].

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There are many famous philosophers and hermeneuts who expose the manipulative power-interests and show how they work in various aspects of our life. For example, Ronald Barthes in his *Mythologies* unmasks manipulative devices that are offered as natural 'truth'. By providing a vivid example of photographs in magazines that use different techniques to show the object in a more attractive way, he shows that we often treat something artificially created as 'natural' or 'given' [1, p.14].

There is also Jacques Derrida who in many aspects follows Nietzsche's view that there is no absolute truth and there are only interpretations. He uses the theory of signs to show that such things as language and truth are not 'item-centered'. In his opinion, 'meaning is always postponed, in the sense that new meanings constantly overtake it as new interests and new cultural frames repeatedly change its multi-level currencies' [1, p.15]. Similar to Derrida, the possibility of universal truth is rejected by Jean-Francois Lyotard. He insists that 'we cannot grasp reality, because it slips by before we can catch hold of it' [1, p.16].

Unmasking manipulative interests is one thing. But is there a way out for the suspicious and frustrated postmodern self? Antony Thiselton, a world-renowned British theologian and hermeneut, says 'yes' and he sees it in Christ. The author notes 'that a Christian account of human nature accepts the capacity of self for self-deception and its readiness to use strategies of manipulation'. He also accepts that it is common for some religious people to use manipulation instead of truth while believing sincerely in the truth of their own inherited religious rhetoric [1, p.13].

But unlike philosophy and some other disciplines which share the same loss of truth and postmodern perspectives based on suspicion, 'theology serves to establish critically-informed trust'. And it still tries to recover elements of truth and sincerity from among the 'chaff of self-interest, manipulation, and power-claims' [1, p.16].

There is no place for self-deception and manipulation in the New Testament and these things are treated as something to be changed and transformed. The respect for the other as a unique and active person – that is what lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. Manipulation, trickery and craftiness are considered to be the immature strategies while coming to maturity implies respecting with love the personhood of the 'other' [1, p.14].

Although there are some claims to Christianity, it still provides some hope for the postmodern world. Hope that the will-to-power postmodern self will give a way to the self that doesn't seek ways to manipulate and control but genuinely respects and loves the Others in their own right. The reference to Christianity providing hope and a real way out for people lost in suspicion seems to be convincing. Our idea is that it is essential to hear the true message and follow it.

#### REFERENCES

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