POSTMODERNISM IS DEAD NOW WHAT?

DISTRIBUTED CULTURE AND THE RISE OF THE NETWORK AGE

Decreeing the birth and death of eras is an iffy business, especially if it's being done without the benefit of at least several decades of thoroughly informed hindsight. This is particularly true of a beast like Postmodernism (PoMo): when a generation of scholars is still debating over what it is, good luck achieving consensus on when it's over.

With this caveat firmly in mind, however, there are a number of factors which I believe make it possible to consider the "Death of Postmodernism" argument now, at this very early date. [1] More importantly, we need to open a dialogue about what comes next, and to begin formulating an intellectual framework to guide cultural development in what promises to be a watershed period for human social evolution.

There are three questions we must consider when discussing paradigm shifts of the sort suggested here. First, is the historical and cultural environment conducive to a large shift in social organization (is the timing right)? Second, is the old paradigm spent? Third, is there a new paradigm ready to take over? With respect to the present moment in history, the answer to all three questions appears to be "yes."

First, the present moment could hardly provide a more fertile ground for grand shifts. Humans - at least,

humans of the Western, "First World" variety - are obsessed with time passage, temporal signposts, and the taxonomy of eras, and the turn of a millennium represents an inherently important historical landmark. While the end of the second thousand years hasn't been attended by the fervor associated with the end of the 1st Millennium, which many Christians expected to signal the end of the earthly world, it was nonetheless a significant event, and one that provided ample opportunity for all sorts of self-examining "state of humanity"

tus for PoMo was the destruction of dysfunctional social institutions and ideologies, and the once-absolute credibility those institutions has wielded during the Modern period had been sufficiently eroded by the end of the century to permit large-scale reconstruction around more productive cultural values.

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rhetoric. At some level, the turn of a millennium, or even a century, causes humanity to turn its collective eyes to the heavens, waiting for something momentous to happen.

On the second criterion, there's a good case to be made that Postmodernism had run its course by the end of the 20th Century and that it had accomplished most of the ends for which it existed. As will be discussed a bit later, the historical impe-

political, and economic infrastructure around electronic networks and the metaphorical re-structuration of human activity around social practices that mimicked the distributed character of the network.

[1] I expect that in the future historians will be quite comfortable identifying September 11, 2001 as the precise moment of Postmodernism's death, and that they will find ample facts and arguments to support the contention. This essay will not address that question specifically, although it is one I find to be extremely interesting.

By Samuel R. Smith

The social structure of the Network Age is already evident, and we can potentially anticipate a great deal about the next few decades of our lives by examining the essence of the network, both in its literal and figurative manifestations. But understanding the order of the coming age of distributed culture requires us first to examine our most recent eras, Modernism and Postmodernism, because it is within this longer context that the next age begins to make sense.

I apologize in advance for the lack of nuance in the following sections; the shortness of the allotted space means some dramatic oversimplification will be required for the purpose of demonstrating the long arc - the "megatrend" - of Western society's century-long evolution from Modernism to Network culture.

MODERNISM: THE AGE OF THE MONOLITH

Modernism arose early in the 20th Century and stood as the dominant mode of Western culture until (depending on who you believe) roughly the 1960s, and was driven by a remarkable building impulse, both in infrastructural and socio-political terms. One of the best ways of understanding these complex dynamics is to consider the theoretical framework employed by Jean-François Lyotard, the prominent French Postmodernist scholar.

Lyotard introduced the concept of the metanarrative to describe the "big stories" around which societies organize themselves. In the United States, for example, society is dominated by metanarratives like democracy, free enterprise, and Christianity. These ideological belief systems dictate nearly all phases of social organization, and most importantly, they inform the institutions that govern and shape our lives. Public Education and Government, for instance, arise (more or less) from the metanarratives of freedom, equality, and participatory

democracy. The institution of The Church arises from the dominant religious metanarrative, Christianity. Our economic infrastructure hinges on the increasingly powerful metanarrative of the free market. And so on.

The Modern period was an age of incredibly powerful metanarratives and institutions. The metanarratives of Naziism and Fascism, for example, gave rise to governments in Germany and Italy that threatened the integrity of global society on an unprecedented scale, and the war to squelch the governmental and military institutions that grew around them embroiled most of the nations on the planet in one way or another. The aftermath of the "Big War" saw the ascendance of two new "superpowers" - a wonderfully Modernist concept - each built around a powerful set of related ideological constructs: in short, the Cold War period of the Modernist Age was about the metanarratives of democracy vs. communism. The Modern age saw a dramatic increase in technological know-how, which was put to service in building infrastructures worldwide. Large, monolithic organizations were empowered to decree meaning and truth, to establish norms and boundaries, and to sanction those who failed to stay within the lines. [2]

Further, the Modern years were an era of unusual, if forced, ideological unity. In the U.S., most people attended church, and people's religious practices tended toward the conventional activities sanctioned by large, established denominations - Judaism, the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and so on. While there were certainly people who didn't worship in the conventional fashion, the Modern period was for the most part an age of denominational power and authority.

In short, then, the Modern period was characterized by large institutions with the authority to pronounce truth, monolithic order, unitary belief systems, and public adherence to convention.

POSTMODERNISM: THE AGE OF DECONSTRUCTION

If the Modern Age was about constructing powerful institutions, the Postmodern, driven by a destructive impulse, was about tearing those institutions down. Lyotard asserts that in the Postmodern, the metanarratives that defined the previous age lost their power to signify, their authority to dictate meaning.

Certainly the old institutions didn't disappear, but their importance in culture gradually and persistently diminished. Systems of governance remained and operated more or less as they always had, but public respect for government eroded dramatically, especially once the Baby Boomer generation began to find its voice in the mid-'60s. Whereas the government had once possessed the credibility to dictate the legitimacy of military activity on the other side of the world - Korea - the arrival of Vietnam demonstrated clearly how the dynamic had changed. The public, or at least large segments of it, was no longer in a mood to have institutional truths pronounced for it. Labor unions, which wielded remarkable political power during the middle part of the 20th Century, saw their influence wane as we approached the Millennium. Traditional religious denominations were still around, but the Postmodern years saw their membership rolls declining and a corresponding rise in new, non-denominational religious practices, including the ascendance of unaffiliated congregational Christianity and a dramatically increased interest in alternate spiritualities (New Age, neo-paganism and Wicca, etc.)

While humans are wired to interpret destruction as dysfunction, the fact is that a great deal of the dismantling going on in the Postmodern era was positive and productive. Since most of society's inequities were perpetuated by governmental, educational, economic, and religious institutions,

[2] Not a new concept, to be sure, but one which arguably realized its ultimate expression during the Age of Superpowers.

emerging metanarratives of social justice like civil rights and gender equality found themselves directly opposed by the established Modern order. Viewed this way, the old pillars of social organization had to be dismantled because they were barriers to a world where everyone competed on a level playing field, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, etc.

The economic sector's de-structuration took a slightly different, although very important route. While free market economic institutions remained strong and even increased in power, their organizational makeup changed dramatically during PoMo's final years. Once upon a time, The Company was a powerfully important institution, and was a central component in the lives of most Americans, especially. Workers, and sometimes entire families, would spend their whole careers with a single employer, providing dedicated and reliable labor in return for the company's guarantee of security. In recent years, however, large corporations have sought to rid themselves of any obligation to social stability, "laying off" millions, outsourcing job functions, and trimming benefits at every turn. The result is that the new corporation is a fractured, downsized shadow of what it once was. You might have the same number of people in the same buildings performing the same kinds of tasks, but instead of a unitary corporate entity, what you're actually seeing is several distinct companies existing in a symbiotic Web. Maybe half of the workers you see aren't employed by The Company, but are instead employed by contracting agencies, who can provide the original services, employing many of the same workers, to the company for less money ("improved efficiency," after all, has a lot to do with "decreased benefits").

The result goes well beyond the obvious dismantling of the old, Modernist corporate model. When The Company, once a pillar of community life and organization, reconstitutes itself in this fashion, it disrupts the continuity of the community. People who once worked for the same

employer, and thus felt shared loyalties and identities, now work for several companies, and the shared bonds are gone. Further, since the impetus for the disorganizational shift is cost savings, workers now face a more tentative career situation. They have less voice (since worker leverage is a function of sheer size and unity), and the resulting decrease in stability and security ripples across every component of communal life. In the end, communal cohesion as we knew it in the Modern Age is compromised as one of its most important supports is kicked from under it.

Postmodernism, then, was about the deconstruction of the dominant institutions of the Modern and the discrediting of the corresponding metanarratives that gave life to a host of real and perceived social injustices. While PoMo certainly nurtured some excesses, there's a good argument to made that it was a necessary phase in Western society's evolution toward stronger and more productive modes of social organization.

impulse is properly understood as paving the way for a higher order of social organization. The period from the end of the second World War to the present has witnessed the most explosive advances in knowledge in human history, and while the Modern era was the ultimate expression of the industrial ethos, there can be little argument that its time had come. 3rd Millennium culture is driven by infinitely more complex modes of science, technology, and communication than the world has ever imagined, and it only makes sense to expect that from this will emerge a social order that reflects these new relations with the material world.

So what is this new thing we're building? Actually, I've been pondering the question for several years now, ever since reading Virtual Light, the first book of William Gibson's "Bridge Trilogy." As the book opens, we are treated to what I imagined to be the final moments of PoMo (although I can't promise that Gibson sees it quite the same way). The central metaphor is the Golden Gate Bridge, which has

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UP NEXT:
THE NETWORK AGE

Humans are organizational creatures, and it seems unlikely that "tear-down" phases such as the Postmodern can ever be anything more than brief, transitional blips on the chart of social evolution. Complexity theorists have demonstrated, quite compellingly, that the world is driven by an inherent tendency toward higher, more complex modes of organization. If a society stops building and begins dynamiting the foundations on which it is built, it's safe to assume that society is preparing for something more elaborate than what's being dismantled.

If we accept this assumption, then it means that PoMo's destructive

been decimated by a massive earthquake, and, rendered useless for its original purpose, has been appropriated by a thriving community of society's castoffs - a supremely Postmodernist conceit by Gibson, who is well acquainted with the social theory surrounding PoMo and considers his work to be part of that milieu. The bridge seemed, almost immediately, to represent the end of the Modernist arc that began with Hart Crane's epic long poem, The Bridge, which focused on the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge early in the 20th Century. In Virtual Light we're clearly poised and waiting for the next big thing to happen, and happen it does, in spades, in the closing moments of All Tomorrow's Parties, the trilogy's

final installment.

In the "real world," the next big thing has been sneaking up on us like a rhino in tap shoes for some time. If we think about our lives here in the early moments of the 3rd Millennium, we can probably see any number of ways in which we're part of an emerging networked social order, and the network itself serves as the best metaphor I can think of for where we are and where we're going now that the big deconstruction is behind us.

From a technological and social standpoint, few things have exerted as massive an impact on Western culture over the past few years as the Net - the result of spectacular parallel

than the network.

In other cases, our colonization by the Net has been hidden from our view. The fact is, in most developed areas of the planet, it's nearly impossible not to be shaped by the network unless you have adopted a highly informed and aggressive opt-out strategy (ie, living in a cave). If you have an ATM card, you're a citizen of the largest network in the world. Driver's license? Credit card? Home loan? Student loan? Discount card for your local grocery store? If you have any of these, you're in the network. Give facial recognition technology another five years and you'll be assimilated by simply appearing in public without a

interactions depends less on the address of the building where the offices are and more on our IP addresses. The institution is everywhere there's a terminal, a critical distinction in understanding that the Network Age is polylithic in nature. This suggests profound implications for the makeup of organizations, because now you can be an active participant in any number of social activities without having to centralize yourself. A congregation of 1000 people can share a worship service from 1000 separate locations, for example. [3]

DISTRIBUTED CULTURE: A SMALL PICTURE

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developments in personal computing and electronic communications. In some cases our migration into the network has been conscious and explicit. E-mail, for instance, has provided us with an easy and inexpensive means for staying in touch with friends and family, in many cases including people we had simply lost touch with before e-mail. The Web is now a primary source for news, to say nothing its role in helping foster communities of interest. Whether you're looking for barbecue recipes, researching vacation sites, seeking people who can provide information about a rare condition your child has been diagnosed with, investigating dog breeds, searching for clues about your family's genealogical past, discussing the merits of the new Peter Gabriel CD, or whatever, there has arguably never been a technology more ideally constructed for the exchange of information and ideas

mask.

For better or worse, contemporary culture is network culture, and it's important to understand that network culture is by nature distributed culture. Modernism was about centralization, but the Network is decentralized - it is ubiquitous and omnipresent, although no less rigorously structured. Our relationships with institutions were once conducted around the site of the monolith - the bank, the church, the school, the county courthouse, these were all physical places and to transact business with the agency in question, you had to transport yourself to the physical address of the institution. In today's corporate lingo, we might say that these official relationships were "institution-centric." Networked, distributed culture, though, is "citizen-centric" (though we'd do more justice to the actual character of the relationship with the term "customer-centric"). The locus of these organizational

Below are a few snapshots that illustrate bits and pieces of the new social organization, and while the collected picture is far from comprehensive or definitive, it hopefully will provides hints and clues to the character of the Network Age.

One thing is clear, though - most phases of life in the coming decades will be shaped, if not aggressively determined, by technological advance. Obviously, the network will play a central role in the Network Age, and for this reason we should begin by noting the promise of Internet2, currently under development by 500 universities, research organizations and businesses. According to a recent Wired article, Net2 holds huge implications for entertainment (think 70-Mbps streaming media on a 12-speaker surround sound system and sharp video on a 30'x17' screen), medicine and education, and it's easy enough to assume that this isn't even the beginning. (http://www.wired.com/news/technolo-

[3] At some point in the past few paragraphs it might have occurred to you that my description of network culture was starting to sound a bit like the technotopian rants you used to see in popular magazines back in the mid-'90s, the ones that described in breathless detail how the Internet was going to solve every problem afflicting the human race. Please understand, there's nothing remotely utopian or technophilic in my conception of the coming Network Age. I'm seeking to describe how social relations will be, already are, changing, but it would be foolish to think that distributed culture is automatically any better than what we have experienced before. In fact, we'd do well to interpret whatever boons we gain in light of that which we will inevitably sacrifice, and we'd be advised to anticipate that some of the most powerful drivers of culture historically, greed and power-lust, will survive nicely, mutating to take full advantage of dynamics and opportunities that didn't exist in the Modern and Postmodern.

gy/0,1282,56110,00.html) With this said, here are a few things to think about.

Techno-colonization of the mundane.

Over the next few years network technology will simultaneously become more ubiquitous and less visible. According to a recent technology forecast from PriceWaterhouseCoopers, "the proliferation of printable, low-power, short-range radio ID tags will imbue many formerly dumb household appliances with 'smart' computing power. Alongside these developments will go efforts to hide the difficulties of tying these devices together and managing large numbers of networked computers, phones or gadgets." *(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/2449009.stm)*

To an extent, this phenomenon is already occurring - few people realize, for instance, just how computerized their automobiles are. Once manufacturers develop the ability to hitch existing onboard computing power to wireless two-way transmission, drivers will be beset with another array of trade-offs to ponder. On the one hand, the technology will make it possible to diagnose problems before they become serious, and in some cases, repairs can be accomplished without the driver ever realizing anything was wrong (in the worst cases, drivers will receive a message that immediate mechanical attention is required, along with directions to the nearest "authorized" service center). On the other hand, this tech will enable a whole new round of unwanted governmental intrusion into the simple act of driving to the store. The car will now exist as an overt network node, as will (eventually) every point along the highway. There will be a powerful push by law enforcement to mandate automated reporting by the vehicle of minor traffic infractions, with the conviction and "appeal" process being equally automated.

Social.

More than ever we should expect to see relationships beginning online, often through communities of interest like topic/issue lists and chat rooms, and then developing IRL (in real life). Dating and friend-finder services are already finding more success as they refine their knowledge bases, and as more people disclose more of themselves to the network, enriching the services' analytic and predictive fields, we should expect third-party relationship brokers to become more and more relevant. This is particularly true since the network, while good at facilitating electronic interaction, tends to increase our physical isolation from each other (especially when the same kinds of technology actively target physical presence in other spheres of life, such as the impact of telework on the traditional social dynamic of the office environment).

Political and civic activity.

The Modern Age taught us to distinguish between Big Politics and "grassroots" activity - big was national, and grassroots was local. However, in the next 20 years we can expect to see the emergence of Big Grassroots, political activity that is bottom-up, empowered by electronic networks, and sufficiently large and savvy to challenge Big Politics without engaging the money industry of the contemporary national media/political scene. Large political interests have so far managed to use the massive cash outlays required to fuel television campaigns as a way of keeping like-minded people across the country out of the mainstream debate. But recent successes by grassroots, marginalized interests (think about protests against the World Trade Organization, for example) indicate the potential organizing power of the network.

This means that we would see, in the near term, a decentralization of political power and money, as the major parties, PACs, and interest lobbies reallocate resources around powerful distributed nodes of influence. In fact, this shift probably represents the closest thing we're likely to see to campaign spending reform.

Further, electronic networks could well ignite a new interest in civic activity. The capability of the Net to pull together people of like interests and to enable communication and coordination could result in a redistribution of energies formerly devoted to local-minded orgs like Rotary, Kiwanis, Lion's Club, etc.

Popular music.

Radio is dead. Currently, the only meaningful access points to new music are online, and we should expect this to continue for the next few years (and by meaningful, I'm referring to the potential to reach a sizeable national audience). The continued diffusion of high bandwidth will provide independent artists with a steadily increasing audience, and it wouldn't be surprising if we don't see, within a decade, the breakout of a multi-platinum artist whose music has never been played on over-the-air corporate radio.

However, it will be essential for the online medium to develop filtering and validation channels. It's impossible to sample even a fraction of a percent of what is already available on MP3.com alone, and the success of the music industry hinges on the ability of at least a few artists to attract large audiences (if you know there's no hope of achieving notoriety, then you inevitably approach music as you would any other expensive hobby, and this works against the kind of commitment necessary to achieve art of surpassing and enduring quality; if you have a sliver of hope, on the other hand...)

If music culture is to avoid the fatal dissonance of information overload it will be necessary for a gatekeeping function akin to the role played by rock & roll DJs in the '50s and '60s to emerge. The DJ was the guy in your town who had connections, knew all the latest groups, was in touch with the trends, and who actually had a job that provided him with the time to listen. He was an informed voice, an important opinion leader, and he served as a cultural arbiter of taste and merit, something that is sorely needed as the signal-to-noise ratio diminishes. It seems likely that this function will occur, early in the Network Age, as a genre-driven agent

(there's very little "local" in cyberspace, so the all-important "nearby" criterion will refer to style-based touchpoints), and once workable functional and operational standards are established, we should expect the rise of cross-genre channels.

If this consolidation is critical and quality-driven in nature, popular music might well experience a boom unlike anything it has seen since the British Invasion. If corporate interests like Clear Channel co-opt the medium, the result will be like contemporary radio, only bigger and emptier.

Medicine. Gibson envisions, in his "Cyberspace Trilogy," that medical technology will evolve to the point where unlicensed backroom clinics (such as the one where Tom Cruise's character got his eyes replaced in Minority Report) have capabilities on a par with what you expect in the finest big city hospitals. We might eventually reach that point, but in the near term we should expect top-tier medical research and delivery to remain fairly centralized, thanks to considerations of cost and the concentration of human resources, with a couple key exceptions.

First, we are already witnessing a promising diffusion of the diagnostic function as a result of network technology. Net-based connectivity provides doctors in remote geographic locales instant access to the most up-to-date databases on the planet, and the same up-links allow patients in these areas the next best thing to being there. You might have to travel to a central location for treatment, but the Net is already having a substantial decentralizing effect on pre-treatment phases.

Second, and in the longer term, since network technology enables a broader distribution of information and expertise, knowledge-sharing programs between established research, treatment, and teaching centers and smaller, less prestigious facilities could result in a substantial improvement in the quality of medical education and treatment available to remote regional, underserved urban, and developing international sites.

New Urbanism. One of the hot new development trends is the "new urbanism," which aims to counters the sterility of suburban ring build-outs with smaller communities that mimic the traditional neighborhood. According to New Urbanism.org:

> *Urbanism is...essentially a re-ordering of the built environment into the form of complete cities, towns, villages, and neighborhoods - the way communities have been built for centuries around the world. New Urbanism involves fixing and infilling cities, as well as the creation of compact new towns and villages. New Urbanism promotes the creation and restoration of diverse, walkable, compact, vibrant, mixed-use communities composed of the same components as conventional development, but assembled in a more integrated fashion, in the form of complete communities. These contain housing, work places, shops, entertainment, schools, parks, and civic facilities essential to the daily lives of the residents, all within easy walking distance of each other. New Urbanism promotes the increased use of trains and light rail, instead of more highways and roads.... Currently, there are over 500 New Urbanist projects planned or under construction in the United States alone, half of which are in historic urban centers. (http://www.newurbanism.org/pages/416429/index.htm)*

The New Urban vision, then, is highly distributed and polylithic, with the big Modernist suburb - thousands of houses over there, chain restaurant hell over by the Beltway exit, etc. - replaced by a number of smaller, integrated mini-cities that recall nodes on a network. If the popularity of the New Urban developments I have encountered, including the one at the old Stapleton Airport site in Denver, can be taken as indicating a megatrend, we might check back in 50 years and find that the once-popular suburban model has all but disappeared.

Graffiti by Photo & the Fun Gang et al. - Photo P. Lichty 2001