Leading in the Future IX: Fragmented and Inconsistent Images

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Not too many years ago, Santa Clauses were sold at Christmas time in Japan. However, rather than Santa riding on a sleigh, he was nailed to a cross—an inaccurate (though perhaps insightful) conversion of an icon in one culture to a second culture. Worshippers at the wailing wall in Jerusalem bring cell phones and mobile devices so that their relatives in other parts of the world can offer prayers at the wall—a juxtaposition of premodern ritual with postmodern technology.

A tribe in Western Africa has lost its culture. One of the members of the tribe searches on the Internet for a specialist in this tribe's culture. He discovers a professor in England with this expertise. Leaders of the tribe fly in the British expert to teach them their own culture—a disturbing loss of the old culture and use of postmodern thought and technology to bring about a renewal of the old culture. Offered in most cases by Walter Anderson (1995) in *The Truth About Truth*, these images are perplexing, disruptive, at times humorous, and definitely descriptive of our new postmodern world.

In a newspaper article of the late 1980s, entitled "Hip Deep in Post-Modernism", Todd Gitlin (1988) prophetically described the blurring and juxtaposition of forms, moods, stances and cultural levels in the postmodern world. According to Gitlin, we had moved in our postmodern world into a form of global capitalism (perhaps better labeled as *post-capitalism*) that requires high levels of consumption, which in turns requires "ceaseless transformation in style, a connoisseurship of surface, an emphasis on packaging and reproducibility." A widely seen bumper sticker--"The one who dies with the most toys wins"—illustrated this point. Have things changed much during the past three decades or are we still living in a post-capitalistic society?

Heaps of Fragments

A few years after Gitlin, Frederic Jameson (1991) wrote about the "heaps of fragments" (a pastiche) in the production of postmodern culture—though he declares:

> . . . the description of postmodernism [is] something for which the word fragmentation remains much too weak and primitive a term . . . particularly since it is now no longer a matter of the breakup of some preexisting older organic totality, but rather the emergence of the multiple in new and unexpected ways, unrelated strings of events, types of discourse, modes of classification, and compartments of reality. (Jameson, 1991, p. 25)

Jameson sometimes uses two other terms, *random pluralism* and *pastiche* (a clustering of mimicry and blank parody) to address the issue of fragmentation. Random pluralism is found in the hand-me-down scrapes of culture and images from the modern and even premodern era in our postmodern world. These remnants are inextricably interwoven with new and surprising cultural elements (Jameson's pastiche) to produce a fragmented and inconsistent image of our time.

Such a world tends to deny the continuity of tradition and undermines the certainty of specific social constructions of reality. History, according to both Jameson and Gitlin, has been ruptured. We live in an era that need pay little attention to the past. As Jameson (1991, p. 36) observed, over half the people who have ever lived on earth are still alive: "the present is thus like some new thriving and developing nation-state, whose numbers and prosperity make it an unexpected rival for the old traditional ones."

The Truth About Truth: Is It All Still True?

Many of these observations and conclusions were reached during the 1990s. Are they still true? Is there still a complex and often contradictory interweaving of diverse traditions and cultures. Does technology disrupt, distort or (perhaps) at times enhance our sense of truth and reality? I would suggest that this postmodern condition still exists and that it is actually intensified – leading to something that is widely described as VUCA (volatility, unpredictability, complexity and ambiguity). In several essays, I have recently added the characteristics of both turbulence and inconsistency to VUCA (Bergquist, 1919; Bergquist, 2020). This VUCA-Plus environment leaves us challenged and often uncertain regarding how we should lead. Furthermore, we are left stranded with neither a clear sense of what we might learn from the past and how we

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might envision the future. Left stranded, we also tend to lose our moral compass. We rely on convenient half-truths and are guided by a certain level of dishonesty—what Dan Ariely (2012), the noted behavioral economist, identifies as the Simple Model of Rational Crime (SMORC). What happens when VUCA and VUCA-Plus meet SMORC. The resulting perfect storm is true postmodernism!

Lets' pause briefly to ponder this statement about being stranded in a postmodern storm. There is no past history nor much of a future in postmodernism. Little attention is devoted in postmodernism to the lessons that might be learned from the past—from history. The postmodern era is defined primarily by what it isn't and by what it used to be but can't again be in the future. According to Gitlin, we are now experiencing our world as an aftermath. In the United State, we labeled our late 20th Century world as a post-Viet Nam, post-New Left, post-Hippie, post-Watergate, post-Marxist and post-Cold War era. We are now post-Twentieth Century and even post-Millennium. We are also about to start living in a post-virus and post-civility era.

Postmodernists are inclined to always see the current world through a rear-view mirror, while at the same time declaring this past world to be irrelevant to our present world. They offer a VUCA-Plus world that is filled with contradictions. We simultaneously revere and cherish the past while tearing it down. The struggle in the United States about our monuments speaks to this ambivalence and contradiction. Jameson (1991) believes that it goes even deeper. We live in a new world of *historicism*. This is not based on a careful analysis of past historical events and careful planning for future events based on this analysis. Rather, historicism involves a replication of the past in the nostalgic touches on buildings and furniture, in the proliferation of museums, and in the recreation of past settings (Disneyland and other theme parks).

Rather than learning from the past, we replicate it and pretend that nothing has changed or that everything has changed—leading us desperately to cling onto whatever we can find from our past. The object relations theorist in the domain of psychoanalysis speak of the need for a transitional object as children move on in their development. They cling on to a teddy bear or a

fragment from their own blanket. To what extent, as adults living in a postmodern world that demands transition and change, do we cling to our own teddy bear or blanket.

Hope and the Future-Less Future

Perhaps, there is no hope for the future— especially given the existential threat of perennial pandemic viruses and a crumbling interaction alliance of nations. If this is the case, then a regressive, sedating appeal to the past may seem appropriate. Fifty thousand men and women gather each August in Pebble Beach, California to show off, admire, race, buy, sell and talk about old cars. So-called life-style enclaves (Bellah, et al. 1985) exist in abundance—with new "neighborhoods" of shared interest being formed in-person or via the Internet for the sharing of such diverse interests as the loving of Chopin and adoration of clam chowder.

While malls lose business, consumers flock to informal markets from the past which feature everything from potatoes to fur coats. According to Jameson, the 1960s began the explosion of our American belief in progress, in the linear order of things, and in moral clarity. The polarization and manufactured truths of our American society 60 years later contributes even more to this lost sense of American progress. We looked in the 1960s for truth in our search for the "real" past—and still are looking for this truth. Yet, we find, that the past revealed in distorted and confusing manner through the postmodern mixture of premodern, modern and postmodern cultures. Patched up monuments don't do the trick, nor do fireworks, parades or secularized religious holidays.

We find these same themes echoed in all sectors of American society. Huyssen (1987, p. 196) noted, specifically with regard to the arts, that:

> . . . all modernist and avantgarde techniques, forms and images are now stored for instant recall in the computerized memory banks of our culture. But the same memory also stores all of pre-modernist art as well as the genres, codes and image worlds of popular cultures and modern mass culture.

Huyssen was speaking of a cultural anesthesia that protects us from the abyss and uncertainty that undergird (or fail to undergird) our society. Does this anesthesia still exist? Do we

collectively dull our senses with variety because the underneath hurts too much? I would suggest that we still become couch potatoes, who indiscriminately consume our many cable channels, Internet sites and tweets, while simultaneously mocking the content being conveyed through these media.

The Future Has Already Been Done

Everything appears to have already been done in some form or other in our postmodern world. Culture becomes a process of recycling. We have gradually begun to embrace a much more Eastern sense about time as a cyclical notion. Instead of believing in progress, we believe in a world that replicates itself again and again—hence the use and distortion of the past and history. Everything in the fragmented postmodern world is seen as a faint resemblance of reality—a private vision that knows no public substance. We are living in an era of edginess and an accompanying sense of unreality and weightlessness—Kundera's (1984) "unbearable lightness of being". This edginess may in turn lead to disengagement and dissociation.

Gitlin describes the postmodernists as "stenographers of the surface." Television, the Internet (and now Social Media), which are the primary conveyers of postmodern culture, know only the present tense: there are no beginnings or ends—only sound bites, isolated images and tweets. Even as television was the primary conveyer of culture during the late 20th Century, it is on the way out as the dominant mode of communication—even with the introduction of many cable-based options. More informal and quasi-verbal forms of communication are becoming dominant. The tweet is actually a throw-away line that used to be found in casual conversation. Addictive text-based conversations take the place of the old verbal channels of gossip. How can a television program (even if based on "reality") compete with our immediate access to digital contact with friends and a "neighborhood" that can be as broad as we want it to be.

We find something similar operating in architecture and in the sciences. Newly constructed buildings offer examples of the postmodern emphasis on surfaces. While they provide interesting surfaces of varying texture, they also tend to be constructed without depth. They provide multiple surfaces that substitute for depth. Computerized goggles and gloves—used in virtual reality machines—make a Boeing engineer or executive think and feel as if he or she

were actually flying a plane or hooking two molecules together. These machines convey the sense of depth, yet like holographic devices, they actually replicate only the surface and never the depth of the experience. We are tricked into believing that we have experienced depth or "virtual reality" when in fact we have seen only the surface. The 3-D glasses of the later stages of the modern era never really captured our imagination. However, the virtual reality of computerized gloves, holographic images, a replicated main street in Disneyland, or, for that matter, a new corporate emphasis on "the core values of our organization" lure us into belief and eventually lead us to a state of confusion about what is real and what is phony.

The American Variety Show

While Todd Gitlin believes that postmodern fragmentation is global in scope and character, he also believes that it is particularly prevalent in the United States. He writes of "American eclecticism" and notes a lack of distinctive American culture. A federation of cultures (the American "variety show") has emerged in the United States. It is bolstered by a sense that "anything goes." Postmodern terms and concepts are defined by lists of examples rather than by any formal definition.

According to Gitlin the postmodern world in the United States during the 1990s consisted of shopping malls, suburban strips, Disneyland, MTV, David Letterman, Hyatt Regency hotels, Doctorow, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Baudrillard, and remote-control-equipped viewers "grazing" around the television dial. What would the list look like today? Some of the same items but many new ones – and ones that are even more diverse in character. What are the new Santa Clauses nailed to a cross or the new intermixing of cultures – what Richard Rodriguez (2003) has called the "browning" of culture? The list might not even stay in date for more than a few hours or days.

Tom Peter wrote many years ago about a manufacturing firm that can change its product line every four hours with the assistance of computers and robotics. This is now commonplace – and 3-D production of products makes the change-interval even shorter. Nothing remains the same for long and what does remain must reside alongside things that are very old, very new or short-lived. While the United States is no longer the dominant country in our 21st Century world

– and the American Century is far behind us--the rest of the world still often follows hesitantly in the footsteps of the United States—especially American culture. We therefore can now welcome the rest of the world to the postmodern world of fragmentation and inconsistency. VUCA-Plus is alive and well!

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