

Pages A&E 608-616 (Poststructural + Postmodern Theories)

Background

- In *The Matrix*, the main character Neo finds himself overwhelmed by two truths:
 - o He lives in a social world with **surveillance** technologies that monitor his daily activities.
 - o The authenticity/realness of his experiences are distorted by the existence of **simulations** of reality.
 - "a model or reproduction...refers particularly to when an image or model becomes more 'real' than 'reality' itself" (608).
- These two truths of **surveillance** and **simulations** occur in everyday life for us too.
 - o Information about us is constantly gathered - documented, recorded
 - o *How do we know what we know?*
 - Much of what we consider our knowledge about the world is stuff that we have not had direct experience with; instead we know "secondhand" through conversation, books, television, radio, newspaper, and the Internet.
- **Baudrillard** → the social world we inhabit has become **hyperreal**.
 - o It is filled with simulations of reality that replace reality itself.
 - o One of the first sociologists associated with postmodern theory.
 - o Concerned more about the issue of **simulation**.
- **Foucault** → concerned mostly with **surveillance**
 - o Chief progenitor of poststructuralist theory.
 - o His work is an important reference point for activists around the world, despite his death in 1984.
- Poststructuralism and Postmodernism radically oppose most of the established understandings of sociology and look for new ways to interpret/think.
 - o Criticize the ability of sociology to develop claims to the truth of social reality.

Poststructuralism

- Convergence of different themes from the 1960s.
 - o Fragmentation of meaning, localization of politics, decline of the idea of Truth, decentering of subject.
- More of a theoretical trend seen a lot among French writers in the latter 20th century.
- Challenges tradition of theory that was dominant in the 20th century in central Europe and America - that of structuralism.
 - o **Structuralism** = forces in social life emerge from human activity but stand outside of human agency; constraining social facts.
 - Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons
 - o **French Structuralism** = more emphasis on language
 - Meaning and role of language in organization of systems of ideas.

- Language has formal properties
- **Semiotics** – study of signs; aspects of human communication that indicate/convey meaning.
- Language has several characteristics:
 - Collective, well-defined, concrete, composed of systems of shared meanings, and subject to objective study.
- **Speech** = “active use of language in everyday interaction and is more transitional and individualized” (610).
- o **Sign** – “that which is socially designated to represent the meaning of objects and experiences. Anything that carries meaning – language, nonverbal gestures, street signs, clothing, pictures – can function as a sign.
 - Each sign is made up of 2 interrelated elements – **signified** + **signifier**
 - **Signified** – object, experience, belief, concept, or feeling that one individual wants to express to another.
 - **Signifier** – deeply trained representation designated to stand for the signified (shaking hands, kissing on both cheeks, saying hello).
- o *Thus language has static and dynamic properties because it embodies the structured nature of a social institution but is also subject to shifts and changes as a consequence of its random nature.
- Believe that the meaning of signs has become fragmented – **floating signifiers**
 - o The link between signifieds and signifiers is now destabilized
 - o “The analysis of the social world is based on the assumption that the patterns, routines, and conventions of social life are inherently unstable and thus only temporarily structured” (611).
 - This leads to a deviation from universal claims to a total understanding of reality, and a move towards the perspective of the individuals who inhabit positions of privilege.
- **Lyotard (1924-1998): The Postmodern Condition**
 - o *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979)
 - Concerned with knowledge and how its changing organization in contemporary societies.
 - Before WWII, knowledge was legitimized through **metanarratives** (grand narratives) = paradigmatic systems of knowledge that contain credible worldviews of society
 - Ex: Marxism, Science, Christianity, Enlightenment
 - o Skepticism toward metanarratives – defining characteristic of postmodernism.
 - o **Computerization of Society** – knowledge has become commercialized and subjected to capitalist market; knowledge is easily fragmented; no longer important what one knows but whether they can afford to buy what needs to be known.
 - Mercantilization of Knowledge

- o Scientific knowledge has been replaced by new system of knowing in which truth is interrelated with power; thus now scientific knowledge has become a form of *narrative knowledge*.
- o Postmodernism rejects this return to metanarratives because it suppresses alternative voices.

Postmodernism

- Popular term in contemporary society (especially in media)
 - o Considerable range and ambiguity in it's meaning
- Debates the use of the term "modern"
 - o "The emergence of international conflict, weapons of mass destruction, environmental threats, fascism and totalitarianism, hyperrationalization, global inequality, and rampant consumerism all incline to pessimism about the prospects of the modern world" (613).
- Rise of new media and interactive technology
 - o Complex fusion of "reality" and "unreality", thus blurring the lines between fact and fiction.
- ***Table 15.1 → Distinctions between Modernism and Postmodernism by Hassan
- Architectural Movement/Landscape
 - o AT&T Building in New York City
 - o Mall of America in Minneapolis
 - o Las Vegas - "a patchwork of simulated styles ranging from Ancient Egypt to classical Rome, to the early American West, to the streets of New York and Monte Carlo" (615).