Dismantling Absolute Meaning: The Postmodern Reader and Cultural Identity

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Abstract :

The area where reader's response criticism and postmodernism find common ground is the destabilisation of essentialised readings of texts. Jean-Francois Lyotard's definitive affirmation of postmodernism as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' is pertinent in identifying the association of reader's response with the context of postmodernist approaches. By considering socio-cultural institutions like art movements and purportedly canonical sociological events like the Renaissance as cultural texts, the paper argues for the characteristic function of reader's response criticism as integral to historicised evolution of these texts. This is done by examining the agency of reader's response criticism involving the active reader.

This interpretive rereading of artistic practices resulting in shifts from normative perspectives that had acted as metanarratives is traced in the growth of 20th century art movements. Dadaism, having deep-seated influences in all media till date, and Industrial Music, a musical genre that has gradually adapted to the 21st century, are critically analysed. These movements, studied alongside their cultural antecedents and lasting impacts in the reading of art as well as their effects on the grand narrative of artistic practices, brought about by the active reader is closely examined in the paper.

Keywords: Reader's Response, Postmodernism, Dadaism, Industrial Music, Popular Culture

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Evolutionary change of social institutions and ideas occurs in the form of a communicative friction where the new order, while contradicting its predecessor, tends to be a natural, inevitable offshoot of it. The process of this specific form of social evolution, in its socio-cultural as well as intellectual sense, can be traced in postmodernist thought. From Jean-Francois Lyotard's assertion of postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, xxiv),conflicting ideas assume the binaries of Hegelian dialectics, where the established order is challenged by new thoughts representative of the contemporary socio-cultural discourse attempting to delegitimise the monopoly of the establishment it wishes to challenge.Assessing Hegelian dialectics in the context of postmodernism enables the examination of the opposing forces from the perspective of Lyotard's statement.Viewing social events, including ideas and movements, as cultural texts, it is observed that several discourses have aimed to claim the status of the metanarrative or the grand narrative, carrying with them the potential to essentialise and universalise schools of thought with the tyranny of absolute meaning. History has witnessed the failure of grand narratives and new ideas have been continually founded upon changing social landscapes by the active reader. Reader's response criticism has been seen to deter the systems of thought which generate and sustain metanarratives. Multiplicity of readings has perpetuated a dissensus, asserting a democratisation of interpretive reading of socio-cultural texts. The evolution of socio-cultural texts has entailed the reader to involve contemporary social conditions to determine the ways in which texts would cater to society, rendering reader's response a critical tool to form social texts with Lyotard's 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.

Lyotard states, 'if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus, justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth' (Lyotard, xxiv). The Bible is one of the most popular examples of a metanarrative and its consequent dismantlement through reader's response. Besides its scriptural significance, it is, perhaps, the most widely read literary text in humankind's history. The reader's involvement has resulted in multiple interpretations of the text. The formation of numerous sects within Christianity,as a consequence of plurality among the readers is a testament to the fact that reader's response elicited Lyotard's 'incredulity' and the resultant breakdown of absolute meaning. A similar breakdown of meaning can be identified in cultural movements and schools of thoughts such as Marxism and gender politics. What began as apolitico-economic

theory by philosophers Marx and Engels was radicalised by the rereading of revolutionists and further interpreted by politicians and scholars, leading to subsidiary forms and diverse constructs of Marxism. In sociology, gender has undergone a similar transformation with longstanding theories leaning towards heteronormativity, serving as a grand narrative for society, having been re-examined by poststructuralist thinkers like Judith Butler.Lyotard, himself, cites the grand narrative of the age of Enlightenment, which is based on investigation of universal truth validated by the purported 'unanimity between rational minds' (Lyotard, xxiii). For the sake of rational truth-seeking, 'the hero of knowledge works towards a good ethico-political end – universal peace' (Lyotard, xxiv).Lyotard implies the need for sceptical examination of the institutions perpetuating the grand narratives. This very spirit of sceptical inquiry necessitates the fall of these narratives, and the perpetual reading of socio-cultural ideas, resulting in their ongoing evolution which does away with a centre or the hegemony of established meaning.

The tussle for philosophical and intellectual freedom from battling grand narratives is extremely pronounced in the world of art. Being the representatives of contemporary issues, art movements have always been responsible for possessing socio-cultural ideas, the political and the intellectual sensibilities of the time of their conception. This notion is self-evident in the manner in which most movements are associated with a major epoch of socio-political re-evaluation.

Although the concept of the grand narrative may seem controversial to apply to the realm of art, experiment as well as a yearning for originality being the essence of all artistic practices, rules and ideas from various periods have always tended to have a definitive impact, powerful enough to construct a metanarrative for creation and criticism of art. Beginning in Italy in the 15th century and developing into arguably the greatest art movement in Europe, Renaissance art has significantly shaped and influenced artistic thought. Several formal concepts such as perspective and realism as per the Renaissance artists are dominant features in the cultural milieuof art even today.With an emphasis on Greco-Roman principles of art, the political beliefs of the Renaissance leaned towards humanism, arising as a result of several social institutions such as democracy founded by the ancient Greeks and celebrated in the paintings. With the rise in humanism, an attention to detail, including more expressive and emotive characters, pervaded paintings. The form of realism entailing human actions diminished the dominance of mythical subjects. European society also had vested interests in placing man at the centre of artistic thought as the Renaissance witnessed the first deliberations of colonialism and expansionist discoveries. While humanism represented the practices which were precursors to a modern democratic society, the period had a large body of religious art, in tune with exploratory voyages of godly expansions.The Renaissance also reflected the economic prosperity in society with increase in trade between Italy and the Oriental regions.

The largest patrons of the arts in early Renaissance were the Medici family, an economic and political dynastywhich made Florence the site for secular, public art. To fight the dominance of republican attitudes glorified by groups like the Medici family, Pope Julius II in early 16th century commissioned Raphael and Michelangelo to work in Rome, resurrecting the weakened Catholic power.

The construction of a metanarrative based on the Renaissance for art, in general, is identified from the exhaustive documentation of the period and the adoption of the practices as Renaissance art theory in educational institutions across Europe. From these academies, one of the most influential art theories, the hierarchy of genres, was postulated by theorist Andre Felibien, in 1669, ranking historical painting as the foremost kind of artistic work, followed by portraiture, genre painting, landscapes, and still life.It is quite evident that the norms, practices and critical analyses of Western art have been influenced by the contexts expounded in the Renaissance as an overarching explanation of the creation and function of art.

Despite diversity in attitudes pertaining to different regions as well as at the level of the individual, major cultural movements, including their successors, allow commentators to assign monikers to them for underlying commonalities. The shared features are occasionally in form, but most potently, in the unifying socio-cultural sensibilities which participants of the period associate with the movement. The fundamental features, humanism being an example in the case of the Renaissance, present the opportunity for the production and critical appreciation of art for the readersnot only as individuals but as communities.The reader, thus, creates a cultural text with the aid of his or her socio-cultural and political background. In his book *IsThereaTextinthisClass?* (1980), American literary theorist Stanley Fish points towards this phenomenon in his theory of interpretive communities – '...interpretive strategies are not put

into execution after reading; they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is assumed, arising from them, (Fish, 13). Thus, in the context of the birth of cultural movements as texts brought about by the active reader, the reader, in this case, being Fish's interpretive community, it is logical to acquiesce with Fish's assertion that 'it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features' (Fish, 14).

The tendency to drastically drift away from conventions surfaced in early20thcentury.The time saw the advent of the avant-garde artists. David Hopkins defines the avant-garde as art that 'came to signify the advanced socio-political as well as aesthetic position to which the modern artist should aspire'(Hopkins, 2). Several art movements such as German Expressionism and Cubism marked the repudiation of the grand narratives of established artistic traditions. For instance, both the aforementioned movements reinterpreted the notion of perspective. German Expressionism was characteristic of distorted, garish depictions of subjects, symbolic of psychological turmoil caused by fear psychosis in the turbulent and bleak political climate. The realism of the Renaissance was not enough to depict the internal reality of the members of society. These movements marked the dismantling of the notion that any single idea would be equipped to accurately express the contemporary reality that was shaped by new and changing socio-cultural and political discourses. The scope of expression also increased in this period with new ways to emote, including the rise of motion pictures. With the ravages of war, new social ideas, capitalism, the rise and fall of Communism, and a surge in industrial production, including digital production, the art forms of the 20thcentury have been platforms of experiments alongside diverse social commentary, irreverent towards traditional artistic norms.

Hopkins cites cultural theorist Peter Burger, stating that 'the mission of the early 20th century European avant-garde, thus, consisted in undermining the idea of art's 'autonomy' ('art for art's sake) in favour of a new merging of art into' what Burger calls, 'the praxis of life' (Hopkins, 2). This attitude has been furthered by artists in the latter half of the 20th century till today.

Dada, a post-World War I art movement, widely regarded as a forerunner of Surrealism, was denotative of the spirit of destabilising the absolutismof artistic conventions with regard to the depiction of society in its very name. Commentators remark that the nature of the word as inviting multiple readings attracted artists to render it meaningful in their subjective ways, depending on their background. The functioning of Dada depended largely on the meaning which the reader would lend to it. Hopkins references Hugo Ball's records – 'Dada is "yes yes" in Rumanian (Romanian), "rocking horse" and "hobbyhorse" in French. For Germans it is a sign of foolish naiveté, joy in procreation, and preoccupation with the baby carriage' (Hopkins, 8).From the perspective of Stanley Fish's interpretive communities, the sentiment of breaking down artistic meaning to various subjective renditions was a collective outcry. The massacres of the war disproved any grand narrative of art that purportedly offered to explain the workings of humanity. Thus, Dada's aim, in exponent Hans Jean Arp's words, was 'to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would restore the balance between heaven and hell' (Hopkins, 8). Hence, the objective of both Dada as well as Surrealism was to undermine the artistic metanarrative, laid down by Renaissance ideals, which proved to be catering to bourgeois sensibilities in the modern age.To attempt a systematic breakdown of the hegemony of artistic norms,Dadaists and Surrealists favoured the stance of anti-art, an attitude to question established artistic thought, and reinterpret art's functions. Hopkins opines that the avant-garde artists were not 'against art per se...rather it was the way art served a certain conception of human nature' (Hopkins, 7, 8).

French painter Marcel Duchamp, who later became an American citizen, initiated the inclusion of existing objects in works. These objects, Duchamp insisted, were to be considered as possessing artistic currency. He infamously contributed the photograph of a men's urinal titled *Fountain*, to the New York Society of Independent Artists exhibition in April, 1917. Duchamp's preoccupation with readymade items to constitute an artistic experience is consistent with Roland Barthes's rejection of the 'Author-God' (Barthes, 146). Duchamp's works attests to Barthes's assertion that a comprehensive reading experience entails that it is 'language which speaks, not the author' (Barthes, 143).By using the readymade objects, Duchamp serves as an echo of the oral tradition. Like the ancient scops, Duchamp transforms into 'a mediator, shaman or relator whose "performance"... may possibly be admired but never his "genius"...' (142). Barthes associates the figure of the author with the discovery of the 'prestige of the individual' (142), an idea steeped in humanist beliefs, an influential constituent of the metanarrativised ideals stemming from the Renaissance. For Barthes, the author's person is the celebration of the capitalist ideals of society, the very charac-

teristics the Dadaists and Surrealists attacked. Surrealism was a mutation of the Dadaist activities, gaining momentum in 1922, under the leadership of Andre Breton, the writer of the manifestoes of Surrealism.

While irrationality as a concept was moreanarchic in the Dadaists, the Surrealists read it in terms of a more systematic political system, in favour of communism. The Surrealists were against the French capitalist expansions, condemning the colonial aggression in Morocco in 1925. Breton was also influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud, which gained currency in the first decade of the 20th century which explains the exploration of dream imagery as fundamental to the Surrealists.Freudian medical practices such as free-association and automatic writing were accommodated in the sphere of art. Gertrude Stein introduced automatic writing in literature. The inclusion of not only the socio-political but the scientific andintellectual ideas in constructing the meaning of Surrealism is reminiscent of reader's response commentator Louise Rosenblatt's inference of the role of the active reader in her experiments involving subjects reading lines from poems. Rosenblatt demonstrated 'the need to insist that the reader is active. He is not a blank tape registering a ready-made message' (Rosenblatt, 34). In the same manner, the surrealists expanded on the Dadaist ideas and introduced socio-cultural information and live ideas in the reading of the movement. The perpetual prevention of ideas from transforming into grand narratives is precisely because the reader, in Rosenblatt's words, 'is not a blank slate'. Hence, ideas never become a consummate, 'ready-made message' – the very claim of the metanarrative.

Provocative artistic endeavours persist. One such movement, typifying the machine age and late capitalism is the experimental musical genre known as industrial music garnering cultural attention from the 1970s. The movement adopted musical textures from the larger spectrum of avant-garde minimalism in 20th century music, with an emphasis on creating new sounds alongside shorter progressions. The synthesiser became the prominent instrument for sampling experimental sounds, as epitomised by Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent Reznor in the 1990s. Musical arrangements included sounds mimicking machine sounds. Symbolising the ceaseless motions of factory equipment, arrangements had minimal colouring and variation in texture, the general tone being connotative of alienation, hopelessness and psychological disturbance.The use of machine sounds is reminiscent of the Dadaist tendency to include the 'readymade' in art. Ideologically, it dealt with social themes that were largely confrontational such as fascism and humanity's slavish dependence on automationin a capitalist age of increasing factory work, making a human being indistinguishable from machines.

The contemporary industrial music being discussed has the origin of the term "industrial" music in the 1920s and 1930s in America. In those days, "Industrial" music literally referred to music that would blare out from speakers by corporations such as General Electric and RCA in their noisy factories in an attempt to distract the workers from their hardships. S. Alexander Reed notes, 'This was a functional music, not consumed as art but disseminated to streamline workers' efficiency, decrease their emotion, increase their reliability, and promote unity among them. In short, it was played to make humans as machinelike as possible: no mistakes, no dissent, no slowing down' (Alexander Reed, 19). English progressive rock outfit Porcupine Tree had their own take on the workplace practice by referencing the corporation named Muzak, in their song "Sound of Muzak". The lyrics, penned by frontman Steven Wilson offers a scathing delineation of the objective of the original industrial music as well as the later incarnations –

'Hear the sound of music

Drifting in the aisles

Elevator Prozac

Stretching on for miles

The music of the future

Will not entertain

It's only meant to repress

And neutralise your brain'

The movement, beginning in the late 20th century, offers ironic commentary on the human condition, from a radical reinterpretation of the earlier situation. The social sentiments regarding the workplace were consistent with the

technophilic cravings of the Italian Futurists, a movement that modern industrial music is critical of. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the champion of the Futurist movement, declared Futurism as 'the aesthetic of the machine'. To a large extent, the industrial music lives up to Marinetti's assertion, as the synth-dominated music production involves several processes of arriving at a sound, since sounds are occasionally non-musical, rendering the result akin to a manufactured product.

A major literary influence on industrial music is the work of American author William S. Burroughs, an exponent of the Beat Generation, and widely revered in the ambit of postmodern thought. His scepticism of tradition and the establishment, and an outright paranoia regarding the machine age resonated with the industrial musicians. Alexander Reed opines, 'the alignment of authority figures and controlling agencies into one metaphorical identity of the machine, and...an artistic means of exposing, questioning, and subverting humankind's mechanised enslavement to this machine' affected the industrial artists greatly (26).This attitude is reflected by Pink Floyd, regarded as one of the antecedents of industrial music, in "Welcome to the Machine":

'Welcome my son, welcome to the machine.

Where have you been?

It's alright we know where you've been

You've been in the pipeline, filling in time …'

Burroughs and his associate Brian Gysin practised the creation of narratives through collages, creating new meaning from collages of cut-ups of existing texts, originally a Dadaist practice. The industrial music equivalent of this is the use of non-musical, industrial sounds as well as segments of orations in song arrangements, encapsulating Bruitism. The sense of parts creating a whole is meant to convey the idea of Fordist production.

Industrial music has also entered the world of soundtrack in film productions with Trent Reznor collaborating with Atticus Ross to write the filmscore of David Fincher's *TheSocialNetwork* (2010). The industrial textures invite audiences to associate the movement's ideas of social censure with Mark Zuckerberg's activities leading up to the founding of Facebook. The soundscape allows for an ironic scrutiny of Zuckerberg's success and the ensuing mechanisation as well as commodification of interpersonal relationships as data.

The wide range of cultural events that industrial music draws from enables it to embrace its postmodern stance. The movement cannot be traced to any single cultural narrative, but acknowledges specific sites of influence like the Futurists, Burroughs and similar critics of authority intertwined with the identity of the machine, minute aspects of the Dadaists, and the larger social discourse of the machine age in general. The industrial musicians do not even attempt to present any assumptions of originality or reverence for any particular metanarrative and are candid about their inspirations. A prominent instance is the name of the English industrial music outfit Cabaret Voltaire, named after the Zurich club that was the hub of initial Dada activities.The postmodernist angle presents the perspective of a cultural intertextuality as the device for formulating cultural movements byshaping texts with the reader's socio-cultural experience, to recall Rosenblatt. Roland Barthes affirms that 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning...but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (Barthes, 146). Trent Reznor acquiesces with this line of thinking in the Nine Inch Nails song "Copy of A", released in 2013:

'I am just a copy of a copy of a copy

Everything I say has come before'

Reznor voices his consternations about the human condition, creating copies of other copies, akin to a machine. The lyrics would also transport readers back to Lyotard's definition of postmodernism concerning the dismantling of metanarratives as well as Jean Baudrillard's ideas about the loss of history in the postmodern world, which is consistent with Barthes's statement that 'the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original' (Barthes, 146).

The primary claim of reader's response criticismlies in the idea where originality is impossible in the shared system of language, stripping the text of any room to offer intentional fallacy to the reader.Lyotard and Barthes highlight this

notion from an individual perspective. Stanley Fish explains the mobilisation of cultural movements representing unified ideas. Interpretive communities constructmeaning by engaging in a collective experience of reading social events.This occurs because the common ground for readers is the shared interpretive strategies instead of the text itself. This facilitates the continuous growth of social ideas while crippling them enough to prevent a situation where they could assert the hegemonic power of the metanarrative, posing dangers to the democratisation of the reading process.

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