DISCURSIVITY AND GRAND NARRATIVES THROUGH THE LENS OF POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract:The paper explores complexities of the relationship between language, meaning and knowledge in world representation and construal through perspectives held by postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. The rejection of meta-narratives brings together core arguments in a critique of foundationalism, as well as of language neutrality in the objective account of a reality true for the totality of human experiences, and replaces these with context-sensitive relativity, subjectivity in the collection of different experiences, and a changing identity of the self as better fitting in the quest for understanding the world.

Keywords: grand narratives, meta-theories, postmodern critique.

In order to understand the focality of the postmodernist lens, we must first look into post-modernity, into postmodern culture, reflecting the conditions of living in a postmodern world, and which, in turn, is the object of exploration for postmodernist theory and its philosophical ideas. Postmodern culture can be described as interconnected, diverse, pluralistic, multicultural, global, free information-based, tolerant and opposed to dominance in any form. Postmodernity developed, simultaneosly, as a continuation of and reaction to modernity, with postmodernism questioning both the rationalist and empiricist foundations for knowledge, specific of modern thought.Lyotard considers that a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern: "Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant."[1]Postmodernists do not discard reason altogether as it remains one of the main ways (but not necessarily the main or the only one) to investigate the world, yet they acknowledge the emotional next to the logical. Studying the possibility of an objective reality, its correlation with an objective truth, and inclined to believe that everything is subjective and relative, postmodernists abandoned foundationalism with regard to knowledge, turned critical concerning faith in science and technology to deliver progress for humanity and rejected meta-narratives for their claim that they hold universal and objective truth for everyone. Modernism itself is a metanarrative centred on the preeminence of reason, science and technological development. But modernism, deriving from a specific context and perspective on the world, could not do away with the moral challenges presented by the rise of colonialism, two world wars and totalitarianism, and could not overcome the incompatibility between objective reason, objective knowledge, one truth for all, and subjective beliefs and their corresponding subjectified values which can be observed in the diversity of human existence which bears more meanings and requires more accounts for everything that is relevant to all people. And this is the disenchantment of postmodernists with modernism, since it fails to assist us in developing a complete understanding of the world; it follows then, that meta-theories, with their value and focus on independent thought cannot explain the totality of our experience, since thought is located in different contexts.

[1] Lyotard, J.-F., "What Is Postmodernism?", in Docherty, Th., (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1993, p. 44.

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Postmodernism embraces "incredulity" towards metanarratives and it is in this perspective that Jean-François Lyotard contends that the genre of narrative cannot be granted absolute privilege over other discursive genres when analyzing human phenomena, "particularly the phenomena of language (ideology)."[2] Grand narratives and the "hegemony" of the meta-narrative should then be replaced with a conception of political discourse reflecting a "contest of local narratives and incommensurable language games - a contest oriented not toward final resolutions but toward creative and novel statements" in their stead.[3] The truth of the meta-narrative in modernism gives way to the postmodern pluralism of narratives which bring new meanings. Fairfield notes that Lyotard's outline of postmodern politics begins with a distinction between modern and postmodern forms of political and epistemic legitimation, by de-centralising the role of the meta-narrative and dislocating from its high standpoint as "theoretical and teleological form of discourse capable of describing and evaluating all other forms of discourse and of grounding our political and ethical decisions once and for all."[4]Knowledge about the way the world really is becomes even more problematic on the supposition that there can be a neutral observer that is able to equate appearance to actuality of reality, appropriately reading into all correspondences; the nature of reality is negotiated between the experience of it and its inter-conditioning with the human mind, and this has great implications on points of view which address sociality, action and legitimacy. Therefore, the rights of smaller, local, particular, contingent and temporary first-order narratives must be reinstated, since political legitimacy belongs, in postmodernity, within various genres of discourse and not 'outside' or 'above' them; Lyotard's view of political legitimation is "of a 'perpetual sophistic debate' between speakers telling often radically different stories, a free market of opinions and deliberations. All utterances in such a debate are seen not as arguments but as 'moves' and 'countermoves' within a context and within a particular genre ofdiscourse; they represent not deductions from principles but tactical moves within a language game."[5]

According to Vandenabeele, Lyotard's pragmatics is concerned with the *differend(s)* and incommensurability which lie beneath a supposed universal, with socio-political differends and injustice occuring in the curtailing of counter-voice due to 'structural dominance' or 'language game': "For Lyotard, the problem is what we are to make of differend(s), i.e. situations that cannot be resolved in an argued settlement, due to the absence of a common language with a supposed consensual finality."[6] It may seem that postmodernism is taking the world apart, reducing it to fragments and dis-connecting them. Yet the particular need not be separated fom one another, they provide the opportunity to bridge onto more meaning and more legitimacy, socially; this appears to apply when considering postmodernist approaches to the disentanglement of Power from authoritative narratives which endow language with dominance structures.

In Foucauldian approach, if knowledge and truth, via language, are created by those in power, the idea of Truth is an illusion - a dominant worldview bound by the specifics of some ideology that people internalise as the outstanding version of reality exhibits a truth regime which shapes their way of thinking, in episteme, in practice, in relations.[7] If truth depends on

[2] Lyotard, J.-F., "Universal History and Cultural Differences", in Macey, D., (tr.), Benjamin, A., (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p. 314.
[3] Fairfield, P., "Habermas, Lyotard and Political Discourse", in *Reasons Papers*, 19, 1994, p. 58.
[4]Ibid., p. 59.
[5]Ibidem.
[6] Vandenabeele, B., "Lyotard, Intercultural Communication and the Quest for 'Real People"', in *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 3 (1), 2003, p. 20.
[7] Foucault, M., "Truth and Power" Interview, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon, 1980, p. 133.

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language, on the meaning of words, the question of correspondence via symbols (we experience the things in the world, which generates thoughts about the world, in representation, things and/or thoughts for which we create words), of words that stand for things which exists, is highly important for the criterion of relation logic. Postmodernists also support the view that, by shaping thoughts, language creates who we are, that the self does not precede language, as to the opposing view held by modernists.

In a Wittgensteinian approach to understand language (words get their meaning from their relationship to other words, by fitting and matching in the worldview structured by language rather than from their correspondence to the world and, in that language actually shapes our perspectives on the world), Lyotard used the analogy of a game. In order to communicate meaningfully, one must understand the rules of the 'language game' and the context in which words are used as tools rather than as symbols of things that exist, which translates to the meaning of a word determined by its use. In this sense language is not neutral, statements are not true or false depending on their accurate correspondence to reality, and moreover, statements which cannot be verified or falsified are not meaningless - it suffices for them to be part of communication context and for people to understand the rules of the 'language game' in order for statements to be meaningful.

To explore this world that is created by language, or the 'phrase universe', Lyotard distinguishes between a 'phrase regimen' and 'a genre of discourse', making four observations which connect micro-narratives to rules of the game and social legitimization: “First, the rules of the language games do not carry within themselves their own legitimization but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players (which is not to say that the players invent the rules). Second, if there are no rules, then there is no game; even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, and 'moves' or phrases that do not satisfy the rules do not belong to the game they define. Third, every phrase should be thought of as a 'move' in a game. [...] The fourth remark made by Lyotard is that one does not use language because one has acquired explicit lexical and grammatical rules.”[8] The social bond is linguistic, a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two language games, obeying different rules; Lyotard considers it wrong to think of language as a tool used by human beings - following rules is necessary, but the rules are not scripts that can account for the way we behave. Vandenabeele argues that Lyotard draws attention to the inevitability of exclusion as such (and the suppression of it), concerned with “something that cannot be appropriated. Immigrants, homeless people, the unemployed, and so on, are not just the side effects of Habermasian emancipator theories. The solution does not lie in re-establishing contact with the public world, but in acknowledging the impossibility of just beginning from scratch or taking initiative. Lyotard points out that taking initiative yourself is impossible: it is always genres of discourse that determine the action taken.”[9] In this sense, Denham stresses that a discourse is loosely defined as a linguistic practice governed by community norms: “A particular discourse within a linguistic community will be circumscribed by some distinctive, or more or less distinctive, set of concepts: aesthetic discourse, for instance, is circumscribed by the exercise of concepts such as 'beauty', 'elegance', 'grace', 'lyricism', 'ugliness', while moral discourse features concepts such as 'right', 'evil', 'malice', 'kindness', 'deceit', 'duty', and so on.”[10] The social relation to objects and concepts is something that Baudrillard observed in the virtually non-existing limits to consumption - people simply want to consume more and more: “This com-pulsion is attributable neither to some psychological condition, nor to the pressure of some simple desire for prestige. That consumption seems irrepressible is due

[8] Vandenabeele, B., [5], pp. 23-24.
[9] Ibid., p. 27.
[10] Denham, A., *Metaphor and Moral Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 44.

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rather to the fact that it is indeed a total idealist practice. [...] Its dynamism derives from the ever-disappointed project now implicit in objects."[11]The collective function of advertising aims to convert all people to the code: "The code is totalitarian; no one escapes it: our individual flights do not negate the fact that each day we participate in its collective elaboration."[12]Reflecting on 'codes', Lyotard asserts that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put, "in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them."[13]

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty states that he cannot put perception into the same category as syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications; ambiguity is of the essence of human existence (existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure): "I am sitting in my room, and I look at the sheets of white paper lying about. [...] If I do not analyse my perception but content myself with the spectacle as a whole, I shall say that all the sheets of paper look equally white. However, some of them are in the shadow of the wall. How is it that they are not less white than the rest? I decide to look more closely [...] provided that in the latter case I assume the 'analytic attitude', the sheets change their appearance."[14]Our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux onto which we are trying to seize; looking for the world's essence is not looking for what it is as an idea once it has been reduced to a theme of discourse (it is looking for what it is as a fact before us, before any thematisation): "Imaginative variation is a form of induction, when we try to comprehend, in direct reflection and without the help of the varied associations of inductive thought, what a perceived moment, or a circle, are, we can elucidate this singular fact only by varying it somewhat through the agency of the imagination, and then fastening our thought upon the invariable element of this mental experience. Thus it is questionable whether thought can ever quite cease to be inductive."[15]Everything in man is a necessity; everything in man is contingency: "Human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking it in hand."[16]In this line of thought, Lyotard argues that scientific knowledge cannot make known that it is true knowledge "without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all."[17]

In an interplay between referent (the thing it refers to) and sense (the possible meanings of what is said or thought), Baudrillard contends that language in seduction is more intelligible than love: it operates at the level of a higher form, a dual form, a perfect differential form of "the individual figure of the subject tracked by his own desire or in quest of his own image."[18] Baudrillard points out that the individual's indifference to himself and to others is a mirror-image of all these other kinds of indifference: it results from the subject's being inscribed in the order of identity, which is a product, paradoxically, of the demand he be different from himself and from others: "For this identitary individual lives on the hymning and hallucinating of difference, employing to that end all the devices for simulating the other. He is the first victim of that psychological and philosophical theory of difference which, in all

[11] Baudrillard, J., *The System of Objects*, Verso, New York, 1996, p. 205.
[12]Ibid., p. 194.
[13] Lyotard, J.-F., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Bennington, G., Massumi, B., (trs.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 10.
[14] Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, Smith, C., (tr.), Routledge, London, 1962, pp. 225-226.
[15]Ibid., p. 63.
[16]Ibid., p. 170.
[17] Lyotard, J.-F., [13], p. 29.
[18] Baudrillard, J., *Fatal Strategies*, Pluto, London, 1999, p. 107.

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spheres, ends in difference to oneself and others. We have conquered otherness with difference and, in its turn, difference has succumbed to the logic of the same and of indifference."[19]

The poetic in this context is the mutual volatilization of the status of thing and discourse.Blanchot recalls being present at a conversation between two men who were very different from one another: "One would say in simple and profound sentences some truth he had taken to heart; the other would listen in silence, then when reflection had done its work he would in turn express some proposition, sometimes in almost the same words, albeit slightly differently (more rigorously, more loosely or more strangely). This redoubling of the same affirmation constituted the strongest of dialogues. Nothing was developed, opposed or modified; and it was manifest that the first interlocutor learned a great deal, and even infinitely, from his own thoughts repeated, not because they were adhered to and agreed with, but, on the contrary, through the infinite difference."[20] Levinas claims that the identity of the same in the "I" comes to it despite itself from the outside, an identity individuates itself as unique in the impossibility of evading the assignation of the other, while existence is an absolute which affirms itself without referring itself to anything other - it is identity, but in its reference to himself man distinguishes a space of duality: "Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are, nevertheless, unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought. What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects! What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives."[21]

Saussure contended that linguistics never attempted to determine the nature of the object it was studying; without this elementary operation a science cannot develop an appropriate method: "Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas and is thus comparable to the system of writing, to the alphabet of deaf-mutes, to symbolic rituals, to forms of etiquette, to military signals etc. It is but the most important of these systems. We can therefore imagine a science which would study the life of signs within society. [...] We call it semiology, from the Greek semeion ('sign'). It would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist we cannot say what it will be; but it has a right to existence; its place is assured in advance. Linguistics is only part of this general science; and the laws which semiology discovers will be applicable to linguistics, which will thus find itself attached to a well-defined domain of human phenomena."[22]Language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is the most characteristic; language can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology, although language is only one particular semiological system.

To conclude, some postmodernist tenets to consider and reconsider. Reality is 'sublime' and language cannot re-create reality. Language engenders the self which is changing, as a growing bundle of experiences. Different forms of knowledge and language form the quest for truth, micro-narratives provide legitimacy to social (inter-)action. And let us not forget Lyotard's perspective: language is not a homogeneous milieu, it is divisive because it exteriorizes the sensible opposite itself.

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[19] Baudrillard, J., *Illusion of the End*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, p. 109.
[20]Blanchot., M., *The Infinite Conversation*, Hanson, S., (tr.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 342.
[21] Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Lingis, A., (tr.), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1979. p. 28.
[22] Saussure, F., *A Course in General Linguistics*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1966, p. 33.

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