

Introduction to postmodernism - about the main in brief

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The word “ post-truth” defined as “ circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” was selected as word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016. In the same year, an article named “ The Age of Post-Truth Politics” in New York Times points out that throughout the history of human civilization, “ fact” has always occupied an important position, but in today’s society, “ fact” seems to be gradually losing its power to dominate social consensus. This “ post-truth” phenomenon is essentially an extension of postmodernism. Postmodernism attacks the ideal of truth and embraces indeterminacy. The prevalence of postmodernism is a reaction to the flaws of the modern world since the 18-th century Enlightenment.

In the Age of Enlightenment, one of what the philosophers such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Montesquieu criticized the medieval church most was that the church used its position of theocracy to obscure the facts. Since then, under the principle of rationality, people were constantly trying to use reason to fight against ignorance and pursue the truth. By contrast, in postmodernism, the factual truth is no longer sacred and inviolable, and instead becomes the object of criticism. Nietzsche, as a precursor for postmodernism, questions the role of language as “ the full and adequate expression of all realities.” Any text in the world no longer reveals the so-called truth, because there is always a gap between language and reality, and any language is inevitably subjective. In other words, any truth is inevitably expressed with a preset position. Therefore, everything becomes questionable. Such question about the reality is closely related to the idea of indeterminacy. If something cannot be distinguished as true or false, then it is indeterminate.

The characteristic of indeterminacy can be observed in many postmodern works. The postmodern novels are like inexplicable enigma. The mysteries set by the author in the development of the story form a maze. The use of symbol in postmodern novels allows readers to understand the theme from different perspectives. Readers seem to be able to capture the reality vaguely, but the theme is fragmented and indeterminate.

The indeterminacy in postmodernism is a reaction to the dangerous consequences resulting from the belief in the truth and determinacy. Postmodernism emphasizes the reflection on language. Language has enormous power. It defines the way we think and the way we exist. Because of that, language can be utilized purposefully as a powerful tool to control our value judgement. As the saying goes, “repeat a lie a thousand times and it becomes truth.” Before and during the world war II, the Nazi Party used a system of propaganda, including newspaper, radio and film. The inescapable propaganda made the broad masses of the people in Germany genuinely believe that the Aryan were superior to other races. What’s more, the Nazis equated social Darwinism with Darwinian evolutionary theory in their textbooks. Students tended to take everything written in the textbooks as the objective truth. At that time, people generally believed in the objective truth implied by the belief in determinacy. From the lessons of the war, people learned how dangerous the consequence of a belief in the faked truth could be. If people believe the existence of objective truth, then language becomes a dangerous tool that can be utilized by the authority. As a reflection, postmodernism is cautious about the power of language by showing that it can be indeterminate.

The indeterminacy in postmodernism is a response to the awareness of people's vulnerability to the information around them. In the 1950s, televisions became commonplace in every household. The percentage of American household owning a television set rose from 9 percent in 1950 to 90 percent in 1960. This popularity of television enhanced the ability of mass media to influence people's opinions. Television and mass media are to people at that the time as the Internet and social media are to us today. "A picture is worth a thousand words." Television carried much more information than other traditional media. The exposure to information brought about prejudice in moral stand rather than the reality. The information reported through television was always selected and processed, so there was no guarantee that it was objective or neutral. Sometimes television stations broadcasted eye-catching but unverified news in order to compete for ratings. The best way to avoid being misled is to distrust what is seen, and this is what postmodernism does.

Science has long been considered as the general and ultimate truth with the deterministic feature that make sense of the world. However, a series of breakthroughs in science during the early twentieth century coincide with the postmodernism philosophy of indeterminacy. The development of general relativity and quantum mechanics have challenged the deterministic law of nature. In quantum mechanics, the once thought deterministic world is described in terms of probability, and the measurement itself will change the state of a given system. As a result, the observer has to be taken into account to describe nature, which leads to the question of whether there exists a reality or there exists only what is observed. Not only new theories

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in physics revolutionized the idea of determinacy, the new results in mathematics also challenged the long-standing view of the existence of the objective truth. Goedel's incompleteness theorem demonstrates the incapability of mathematics and any formal axiomatic system to prove all the true statements within the system. For example, the consistency of the simple structure of natural number cannot be derived from the current axiomatic system, the belief in the correctness of the structure comes from thousands of years' convention. The theorem implies that mathematics, though often considered as closest to ultimate truth, is dependent on conventions instead of reality. Such doubts of determinacy and ultimate truth in physics and mathematics provides concrete evidence for postmodernism.