

Beth Park
Diane Zeeuw
Post Structuralism
6 December 2012

Postmodernity, Art, and Christianity

He is There and He is Not Silent – the title of American evangelical, apologist and Presbyterian pastor, Francis A Schaeffer's 1972 book. In Schaeffer's book, as in all his writings, he defends the historic Protestant faith and a presuppositional approach to apologetics, in contrast to the existential culture of Europe and North America. He succinctly expresses the presupposition of my faith and it is an appropriate opening for an essay devoted to discussing the irreconcilable differences between traditional Judeo Christianity and postmodern theory. This was an issue that became very evident to me in my studies as a fine arts graduate student taking a class on post structural philosophy. It also became an opportunity for me to examine exactly why I find these two topics completely incongruous and my conclusion was this; my disagreements with postmodern theory are presuppositional rather than merely disagreements over application and therefore my disagreements are thorough and complete extending from the philosophical foundations through all applications of the philosophy. My presupposition is God and His written revelation, while those of the postmodern mindset are the individual man as his own source of truth.

To really discuss postmodern theory in contrast with my beliefs, I feel it is important to first cover the modern movement. I have a few reasons for this. First, in my opinion the presuppositions of postmodernity and modernity are the same just made more consistent in postmodernity. I also want to avoid the common confusion that because I reject postmodernity I must be an advocate of modernity, which is untrue. A quote from Stanley J. Grenz's book, *A Primer on Postmodernism* is a good example of my final reason.

Whatever else it might be, as the name suggests, postmodernism signifies the quest to move beyond modernism. Specifically, it involves a rejection of the modern mind-set, but launched under the conditions of modernity. Therefore, to understand postmodern thinking, we must view it in the context of the modern world that gave it birth and against which it is reacting (2).

Postmodernity is a reaction against modernity, not really an alternate philosophy making it impossible to discuss without first touching on modernity.

A great many of my views on modernity are derived from Dr. James Grier. Grier was a pastor for ten years, taught at Cedarville, and then served as dean at Cornerstone theological seminary for 23 years in Grand Rapids. In his lectures he describes the modernist thinker as a believer in the idea that everything begins with man and man decides all things. It was a very optimistic time when man felt there was an answer to everything. But if man is the metaphysical supposition, then man becomes a universe unto himself epistemologically and ethically. Modernists refused to acknowledge this and thought they could still hang on to God even while clinging to man's sovereignty. They thought they could still have a universal ethic even though it originated from man. Eventually it led to the belief that science could prove anything and it was a tool to find absolute truth. During this time modernism gave birth to Newtonian physics. Everything was cause and affect. This seemed to make sense until the 60's when it was debunked by the discovery of quarks and indeterminism. Something that had originally been thought to be a perfect scenario of cause and affect had, at a deeper level, become unpredictable. Science could not explain everything. Another blow to the extreme optimism of modernity was the aids epidemic. At the time it was an incurable, devastating, and unexplainable disease. The impact it had on the positive thought process of the time contributed to the collapse of modernism.

Many Christians subscribed partially to the modern theory and by placing too much emphasis on science. They became too caught up in methods and left out the possibility of God

simply wanting or not wanting something. One of the main reasons I am not a part of the modern thought is I do not believe in the Newtonian physics assumption that the universe is a closed system. This eliminates any possibility of miracles. The biblical definition of a miracle is frequently misunderstood. A miracle is not just a statistical anomaly. For instance, finding a shell on the Pacific coastline that should only be found on an Atlantic coast. This is an anomaly, or something that does not fit with all the other information surrounding it. A miracle is when God chooses to act contrary to the laws of physics.

This leads into a discussion on postmodernity. Stanley J. Grenz's book *A Primer on Postmodernism* was very helpful to me for understanding postmodern thought. In his final chapter he refers to how the evangelical Christian will see and responds to postmodernity. He writes about how many Christians feel the postmodern rejection of the enlightenment goes too far. Objective truth has been discarded. This challenges Christian claims of the objective truth of our doctrinal formulations. Grenz furthers this by saying postmodern theory rejects the idea of ever finding an all-encompassing truth. "Postmodern thinkers have given up the search for a universal, ultimate truth because they are convinced that there is nothing more to find than a host of conflicting interpretations or an infinity of linguistically created worlds" (163). Without universal truth we have lost the ability to evaluate reality. All human interpretations are equally legitimate, and since they will invariably contradict each other, they are all equally wrong as well. Grenz says this lands us in a world constantly struggling with differing interpretations.

I believe in what Grenz calls a center to reality, which is Jesus. Postmodernism says that the world is made up of many cultures within other cultures, each having their own stories or narratives. They are all different and irreconcilable which corresponds with postmodern theorist Lyotard's rejection of the possibility of a metanarrative. Grenz rejects this by saying,

Our world is more than a collection of incompatible and competing local narratives. Contrary to the implications of Lyotard's thesis, we firmly believe that the local narratives of the many human communities do fit together into a single grand narrative, the story of humankind. There *is* a single metanarrative encompassing all people and all times (164).

I agree with Grenz that Christianity cannot become just another faith among many. I believe the biblical message is meant for everyone and is the ultimate truth (Grenz163-165).

One of the many postmodern thinkers that I was introduced to in my studies was Michel Foucault. In an attempt to understand him better, I read an essay written by Foucault apologetic Clare O'Farrell. One of her main complaints is that most people neglect studying the actual writings of Foucault, and simply relay on secondary literature. Yet she also says his writing style was meant for a highly educated, even specialist audience. She lists four of what she considers the most common misconceptions of Foucault. First is that he does not believe in objective truth, only power. Facts are simply a struggle for power. Secondly that Foucault was an anarchist and a nihilist whose only goal was to destroy order and replace it with nothing. Thirdly that he deliberately makes his work difficult to read creating a detriment to those forced to learn it, and lastly that his supposed immoral lifestyle was so repulsive that anything has to say is of no value due to it.

O'Farrell first argues that there is no concrete proof of Foucault's amoral lifestyle and even if there was it should have no affect on his work. It should rise and fall on its own merit. She then approaches the common belief that he denies a universal truth. She claims he thinks we should be careful of simply accepting what is presented to us. She says Foucault just wants the individual to always have the power to modify existing situations or systems of constraint.

Clare O'Farrell's conclusion leaves me with a question. Is it a genuine distinction of any significance philosophically or practically? If each individual has the right to modify his or her constraints, then we are at the mercy of the mob. It seems to me that this is not a far cry from

anarchy. It could be argued as simply being a democracy, but if everything is up to change then there can be no Constitution or Bill of Rights, which results in situations like the French Revolution. O'Farrell's defense of Foucault is window dressing on a dangerous position.

An important question arises from this discussion. How do I apply my beliefs to the art world? Many of the Christian artists I have researched seem to be a bit cliché or specialize in simply illustrating biblical stories. One artist that I feel has a better handle on it is Edward Knippers. His artist statement says his focus is on the body because the body is an essential element in the Christian doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection. His work is very much against Gnosticism, which is a belief some Christians still partially adhere to where they focus more on the spiritual world and less on the physical. I believe we still have a strong responsibility to the physical body, so I can agree with his work.



Soldiers Bathing



Conversion of Paul

In an attempt to obtain some ideas for how the general public perceives art, I made up a simple survey consisting of five questions and gave them to different people I come across at work and home. Through this exercise I inadvertently acquired a survey that exemplifies how I feel art should be used. It came from the answers my father, a pastor, wrote in response to the survey.

1. What kind of art do you like?

I find very interesting art that demonstrates a very high skill level and expresses a biblically consistent message (intentionally or not) in an arresting fashion.

2. In your opinion, what is art and what is not art?

Man is inherently a worshiper. Man was created to worship. It is impossible for him not to worship. The corrupting effect of sin in man results in him worshipping falsely—worshipping false gods—particularly himself. Most of humanity is engaged in self-worship. And yet, whether he is aware or not, all mankind worships.

All that man does develops and builds culture. Mankind develops culture as he interprets this world as God's prophet; as he develops this world as God's sub-regent and as he expresses truth as God's priest. Man as priest expresses truth in music, literature and visual arts. He is to gather information and understanding and then as priest to offer it back to God as praise through art. This is worship.

Art is inherently an act of worship. To talk with integrity about art without acknowledging who/what is being worshipped is impossible. All art reveals the artists religious commitment—whatever that commitment may be.

So then art is an expression of what man is inherently—a worshiper. Art is part of the development of culture. And more specifically, art is worship. And it is a personal revelation of man's commitment.

3. What purpose does art serve?

Art is a means by which we worship God. It is a sacrifice that we offer up to the Lord from hearts of gratitude.

4. What do you feel is your responsibility towards art as the viewer?

1. To interpret the message and judge whether it is expressing truth or lies. Scripture is essential and central in this effort. 2. To evaluate the skill level and arresting quality of art.

Without an object standard of truth grounded in a personal metaphysical reality (God) all cultural expressions, including art, become solipsistic. Meaning becomes entirely a personal construct. The logical conclusion of a post-modern metaphysic, epistemology and ethics is a global village in which every individual creates his own cultural/artistic universe and none of those universes can have any meaningful connection with another. Since the artist has created a universe of meaning without any metaphysical or epistemological connection to anyone else (because there is no possibility of metaphysics or epistemology in post-modernity) all interpretation by the viewer is an imposition of meaning upon the artist's creation and message. It is impossible to talk about viewer responsibility in that system.

5. How important do you think art is today and why?

Art is worship. Man is created to worship. Man must worship. Man must do art.

Taking in account that modernity and postmodernity share the same philosophical underpinnings and that postmodernity is mainly a rejection of everything that I fundamentally believe in, it is clear that my disagreements with postmodern theory are not superficial.

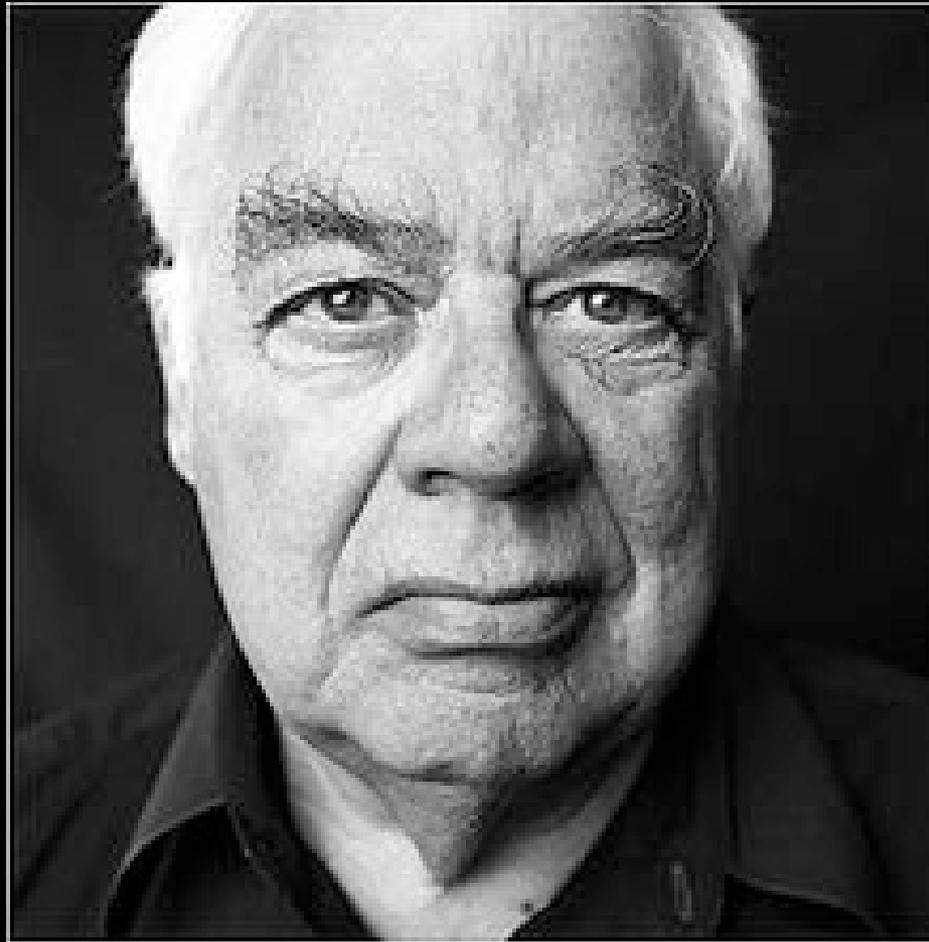
Postmodern theory leaves no room for a concrete faith, which makes it difficult to contrast with my beliefs. We differ at the most basic level; our suppositions. My disagreements with postmodern theory could not be more fundamental; could not be more thorough or complete.

Works Cited

- Schaeffer, Francis A. *He is There and He is Not Silent*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996.
- Grier, James M. "Challenge of Postmodernism". Cornerstone Theological Seminary. Grand Rapids, MI. 1 April 2005. Lecture.
- Park, Russell. Personal Interview. 8 Nov. 2012.
- O'Farrell, Clare. *Foucault and Post Modernism*. The Sydney Papers. 2006. 1-18. Web.
- Knippers, Edward. <http://edwardknippers.com/>. n.p. n.d. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.
- Knippers, Edward. *Soldiers Bathing*. 1999. Northern Virginia. Edwardknippers.com. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.
- Knippers, Edward. *Conversion of Paul*. 1999. Northern Virginia. Edwardknippers.com. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.

Public Art

Richard Rorty



Lucy Lippard



Patricia Johanson



Park for a Rainforest



Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility



Judy Baca



The Great Wall of Los Angeles





Suzanne Lacy



Crystal Quilt Performance

