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Riffing on Postmodernism

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jul. 6, 2009 NCR Today

An article the *New York Times Magazine* by Rob Walker "Consumed -- Remixed Messages [1]" is, to me, a perfect example of how the process of postmodernization functions.

My take on this article is to ask: "Why do we moderns seem so random and un-tethered at times?" Because we don't know, remember, or think to ask: where did this slogan, image and perspective come from?

The definition of postmodernism [2] is as contested as the field it seeks to define. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as either "of, relating to, or being an era after a modern one" or "of, relating to, or being any of various movements in reaction to modernism that are typically characterized by a return to traditional materials and forms (as in architecture) or by ironic self-reference and absurdity (as in literature)", or finally "of, relating to, or being a theory that involves a radical reappraisal of modern assumptions about culture, identity, history, or language."

We can go back as far as the Enlightenment for the sources of postmodernism though it has been identified as a movement in design and architecture beginning in the 1920s. Postmodernism is useful to critical theory because it offers a way to examine the arts, society and information and entertainment media if all their forms.

In a mediated world that offers an ideological buffet (or the more cynical may call it a fast-moving assembly line) of images and meanings that seek to direct us -- or not -- what we may end up with is banality (something is objectified and commercialized among myriad other products that we probably don't need in the first place) or propaganda (somebody wants to direct our thoughts and actions).

Unless...

We keep asking questions.

This article may not be the be all and end all of postmodern discourse, and I imagine some may think this example is an over simplification. It is a starting place, a way to visualize an elusive and debatable process.

I contend that we do not only live in a postmodern era but simultaneously in shifting ideological systems that morph through technological mediation. How these ideologies interact and challenge religion and religious faith can lead to interesting encounters, flat out confrontations, or that in-between place: the energizing and peaceful market place of ideas and dialogue about things that matter.

The author offers a starting point to consider how to find meaning and live mindfully in a random world.

Walker's piece demonstrates that knowing and understanding (and questioning) history and philosophy remain important, if not essential, as is one of the newer academic fields: media studies.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/magazine/05FOB-consumed-t.html?_r=1&ref=todayspaper
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