



My Proto-Barbarist Apologia

It occurred to me recently that perhaps I've been somewhat disingenuous in some of my previous essays' attacks on Postmodernist aesthetics [e.g., "*On Cultural Appropriation*" (August 7th 2018) or "*On Being Derivative*" (June 2nd 2023).] This becomes even clearer when one considers that my website "www.Proto-Barbarism.ca" –although purportedly a radical departure from postmodernist art and writing– is in effect a tongue-in-cheek satirical edifice all built using its same ideas and techniques.

One of the claims of postmodernist thinkers is that originality is no longer possible, as "it's all been done before." Therefore, the only recourse for contemporary artists is to copy, or to create pastiches of, previous artists' images or techniques, or borrow material from other genres, such as advertising or photography. This process has been called "**appropriation**" by postmodernist ideologues and critics.

The Tate Gallery, however, traces the practice of appropriation back to Dadaism. ¹ Dadaism is usually understood as part of the modernist propensity to challenge established styles and forms; however, several critics hold that in effect Dada anticipates postmodernism. For example, according to Thomas McEvelley (1939-2013), postmodernism begins with realizing one no longer believes in the myth of progress; and he claims that Marcel Duchamp sensed this in 1914 when he "abjured aesthetic delectation, transcendent ambition, and tour de force demonstrations of formal agility in favor of aesthetic indifference, acknowledgement of the ordinary world, and the found object or readymade." ²

Perhaps it would be fitting now to ask the question: What do we mean by Postmodernism as applies to the visual arts? **Postmodern art** is a body of art movements that sought to contradict and/or transcend some aspects of modernism. There are several characteristics which lend artistic expression to being labeled postmodern: bricolage, the use of text, collage, simplification, performance art, the recycling of past styles and themes, as well as the break-up of the barrier between fine and high arts, and low art and popular culture.³ However, these characteristics are not exclusive to Postmodernism, as the very definition of Modernism implied a veritable revolution in all the "Fine Arts," starting with the revolt of the Impressionists, whose artwork had been repeatedly rejected by the Paris Salon of the French Academy. These trailblazers organized their own independent exhibitions starting in 1874; and today hardly no other artist of that era is considered as great.

But what exactly do we mean here by “**Art**”? Up to the last half of the 19th century, “The Arts” were grouped into six distinct categories: Literature; the Visual Arts (e.g., painting, drawing, etc.); the Plastic Arts (e.g., sculpture, modeling); Architecture; Music (usually labeled “classical”); and the Performing Arts (e.g., theatre, dance, and related music).³

Just as in politics and in social mores, “modernity” was intended to be a radical attack on the elitism and upper-class definition of what constituted true “Fine Art.” Before the end of the 19th century, only the European aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie had the “breeding” –or inbred right– to determine the difference between true “refinement” and vulgar craft. However, as a result of the socio-political upheavals following the French and Industrial Revolutions, as well as the rise of novel ideologies such as socialism and liberalism, new emerging social classes demanded, not only equality and justice, but also new forms of creative expression.

Among a few of the most revolutionary of the “modernists” in the various genres, we can very briefly name: the writers James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, the composers Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky, the playwrights Alfred Jarry and Samuel Beckett, the architects Walter Gropius and Antonio Gaudi, and the visual artists Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí.

Once the distinction between high and low art became further blurred in the last century, we began to see and hear new forms of popular cultural expression combining folk influences and older refinements, such as the arts-and-crafts movement, great pulp fiction writers such as H.P. Lovecraft and Dashiell Hammett, and appropriation of Afro-American and Latin-American music by popular songwriter/composers such as George Gershwin and Antonio Carlos Jobim.

So, “**postmodernist art**” can be described as a multilayered aggregation of appropriations of earlier works and styles bordering on plagiarism. However, one could argue that the use of pre-existing images or materials with little or no transformation has played a significant role in the history of all the arts since time immemorial; and that mutual cultural appropriation has gone on since the first interlopers of one tribe entered the domain of another: The music of ancient Greece and Rome influenced early medieval music;⁴ Muslim architectural techniques and styles were adapted by the builders of Gothic cathedrals; Italian Renaissance artists copied Hellenistic sculpture; and Japanese *wabi-sabi* aesthetics influenced Western visual arts and luxury ceramics.

So... perhaps contemporary critics will pardon the lack of authenticity and proper gravitas of my Proto-Barbarist constructs in the light of all of the above.

-- *Quod est demonstrandum* --

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appropriation_\(art\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appropriation_(art))

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern_art

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/the-arts>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_music