

Dual Social Theory at Play in the Casino: Black or Red

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In this essay I posit that postmodernism and modernism coexist simultaneously in society. While this hypothesis may be, to some extent, unconventional, it is supported by substantive evidence: the real world. I contend that practical human experiences exhibit aspects of both modernism and postmodernism. It is the interaction between the two that ultimately determines the direction and form that experience takes in the wider social setting. The following discussion uses The Star Casino in Sydney to exemplify this process. I demonstrate that the Casino is a simultaneous manifestation of capitalism, a product of modernity, as well as of commodity consumption and hyper reality, conditions borne from postmodernism. The convergence of both social concepts in the context of the casino, and across wider aspects of the human experience, provides insight into the theoretical framework that supports the present moment we live in.

Modernism and postmodernism

It is necessary to provide working definitions for the concepts discussed hereafter. Readers should see beyond the resulting simplifications and anticipate the greater detail that is to come. I wish to qualify that these definitions are, to some extent, idealisations of postmodernism and modernism. It is fallacious to conceive of either concept as a “unified 242).

The dawn of modernity is typically attributed to the Enlightenment period in the late sixteenth century (Harpham 1994). The Enlightenment marked the beginnings of a social movement toward reason, rights and scientific and political progress. ‘Modernism’, the emergent philosophical and sociocultural ideology from the epoch, remains an enduring voice to those conditions espoused at the time: the quest for truth, belief in individualism and social improvement (Harpham 1994). Modernist epistemology posits that objective reason will discover “genuine knowledge [regarding] our universal reality” and that such reason yields social processes to human “prediction and control” (Boisot & McKelvey 2010, p. 419). Postmodernism, a separate yet related philosophy, represents a decisively different view. Postmodern perspectives challenge the Enlightenment project by subscribing a plurality of subjectivities to a world that is, by virtue of its true character, kaleidoscopically precarious (Malpas 2005). Like modernism, the theories associated with postmodernism are multifarious. However, commonality may exist in the deconstruction of any “transcendent and universal truth” (Boisot & McKelvey 2010, p. 422). As Lyotard so famously said, postmodernism is the “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1979, p. xxiv). Instead, there exists equal legitimacy in all versions of narratives, discourses and conceptions of reality. Where modernism may lament the gaps in knowledge of grand social schemes, postmodernism celebrates them and welcomes an uninhibited exploration of the human experience (Firat & Venkates 1995).

The relationship between modernism and postmodernism has been well documented in various academic explorations (Natoli & Hutcheon 1993; Eagleton 1985). Popular characterisations include the theory that postmodernism represents a radical departure from modernism (Fiedler 1965). Another is that postmodernism is merely the resolution of modernism's unfinished business (Graff 1979). Graff posits that postmodernism "carries the logic of modernist theories to their limit" (1979 p. 208). Many theories consider that modernism was indeed replaced by postmodernism when the former ceased to be relevant in the contemporary social condition (Foucault 1973). Foucault implies that the modern "episteme" of thought will disappear "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (1973, p. 387).

However, this essay explores an alternate theory to those already mentioned. I contend that postmodernism and modernism continue to coexist simultaneously in different aspects of society. This argument is not revolutionary. Eagleton is persuaded toward postmodern cultural dominance but concedes that modernism is a "kind of permanent ontological possibility", one that escapes confinement to any particular "historical period" (1979, p. 72). Lyotard (1984) is more tenacious with the idea. He states that modernism and postmodernism coexist simultaneously in various forms of production. To Lyotard, postmodernism recurs in a "nascent state" (1984, p. 79) throughout modernism's campaign for progress, constantly disrupting and challenging the ideas borne from that plight. In the following discussion I pay heed to Lyotard's approach by applying his theory to practical realities. I contend that everyday social demonstrating that the two social theories are coexistent, and jointly responsible for the "construction of our social organizational patterns" (Parker 1995, p. 557). Boisot and McKelvey are succinct:

Modernists and postmodernists are like blind people who have each seized different parts of the [social spectrum], little realising that their ontologies complement rather than compete with each other (2010, p. 424).

To assist in my exploration, I approach the Casino from two perspectives: first, as an economic entity and second as a symbol for gambling practices.

The casino as an economic entity

The Casino, a capitalist corporation, uses postmodern aesthetics to fulfil its economic imperative. The Star Casino is, by its own definition, a "world class entertain venue" (The Star Casino 2012). The establishment boasts an array of high-end retail opportunities as well as "indulgent" accommodation and "luxurious" gambling products (The Star Casino 2012). According to Hancock, in spite of its "multiple images" the Casino is principally a capitalist enterprise (2011, p. 15).

Capitalism can be understood in terms of its four interconnected characteristics. These are: the claim to ownership for private property, the exchange of resources between producers and consumers, reliance on entrepreneurship and a context of cultures strive toward the goal of "unending economic growth" (Arnason 2001, p. 103). According to Xing and Hersh (2001), capitalism developed in response to the collapse of traditional social customs during the modern era. For example, the dissolution of agrarian trade heralded an integrated system of different economic elements such as "land, natural resources, labour power and money" (Xing & Hersh 2001, p. 15). Further, the cessation of feudalism gave rise to the

concept of individual rewards and private ownership of property (Xing & Hersh 2001). The proliferation of capitalism across Western Europe ensured that the modern era retained relevance beyond its original historical setting (Arnason 2001). Xing and Hersh (2001) demonstrate the far-reaching effects of capitalism by ascribing the practice of colonisation to it. Capitalism brought about the Industrial Revolution and the establishment of privately owned factories from which to manufacture weaponry for the use of imperial expansion (Xing & Hersh 2001). As the influence of capitalist nations grew geographically, so too did the economic model cement its hegemony across vast areas in the Western world (Xing & Hersh 2001). The veracity of Marx and Engel's Communist Manifesto is clear, "[capitalism] creates a world after its own image" (1968, p. 37).

Australia's economy is an exemplar of capitalism (Lloyd 1992). Australia's brand of overseas investment and internal trade endorses private ownership and privileges corporate capital (Lloyd 1992). The Star Casino is one such corporate powerhouse. As a "peak business group" the Casino strives for societal control and dominance (Capling & over seven billion to Australia's annual Gross Domestic Product. The Star Casino alone made a profit of \$6.3 billion in 2011, achieving an 11.3% increase from the previous financial year (Australasian Casino Corporation 2011). In many ways, the Casino's unabashed pursuit of wealth projects it as a manifestation of modernism's pursuit of progress. However, it is not wholly a representation of modernity. The Casino's physical establishment is almost entirely comprised of postmodern aesthetics and architecture (Skea 1995). The object of this convergence is clear: the Casino uses postmodern features to attract and maintain consumer investment in its capitalist enterprise.

The postmodern aesthetic is an outward exhibition of the broader movement (Skea 1995). It revels in a collapsed sense of history, temporality and space to produce "a messy vitality" of layered meaning and multiple foci (Venturi 1966, p. 16). In the context of The Star Casino, postmodern techniques are used to confine customers to a state of unceasing disorientation and exhilarated sensory levels (Skea 1995). In the Casino, patrons are confronted with a reality that is comparable to artificial simulation or, as described by Baudrillard (1988), 'hyper reality'. Hyper reality refers to the simulated state of the contemporary living space, whereby society is comprised entirely of "models" that represent the real but have "no origin or reality" (1988, p. 29). The Casino, an adult answer to Baudrillard's Disneyland, presents human experiences, games and interactions that bear no connection to the referents of reality they seek to imitate (Skea 1995). It is by presenting calculated simulations that the Casino actively conceals the reality that awaits consumers beyond its exit doors.

For example, spatial and temporal dimensions are subverted so as to make it "quite impossible to get your bearings" (Jameson 1986, p. 44). The Casino suppresses distance by presenting numerous geographic locations in the one contrived environment. For example, The Star Casino boasts over twenty restaurants that, while physically close together within the establishment, represent distinct ethnic cuisines from across the globe. In overseas casinos the principle is applied more poignantly; in Las Vegas one can encounter replicas of the Roman Empire, Egyptian pyramids and Venetian canals on the same strip. The effect of these techniques is to present the Casino as a "complete, miniature world" (Jameson 1989, p. 11) wherein the consumer wants for nothing. The Casino also obscures the passage of time. It provides a year-round temperature, there are no clocks, nor windows to record

the sunset or sunrise. In the Casino, temporal signifiers are purposefully “isolated, disconnected” and “fail to link up in coherent sequences” (Jameson 1986, p. 119).

The Casino uses these postmodern techniques in order to condition their patrons into a way that serves the corporations’ capitalist imperative. The aesthetics develop a “disjunction between the capacities” of the individual to locate itself and make sense of its “immediate surroundings” (Jameson 1989, p. 25). Jameson equates this disorientation to the feeling of “schizophrenic depthlessness”, where all contextual indicators “have been swept from beneath our feet” (Malpas 2005, p. 120). However, the consumer’s state is not despondent. Indeed, the bright lights, unceasing entertainment and the promise of striking it ‘lucky’ are both seductive and exhilarating (Boje 1995). In this way, the Casino presents the consumer with a “crisis of achieved utopia” but baits “the promise of its duration” (Baudrillard 1998, p. 77). Patrons are allowed to continue consuming the image of perfection but the Casino designates gambling as the sole means by which they may stay (Boje 1995). Dazed and disorientated patrons willingly accept the ultimatum, relinquishing their autonomy for the opportunity to remain a participant in the Casino’s hyper reality (Skea 1995). Through the use of postmodern aesthetics, the Casino is able to attract and maintain consumer investment in their product, hence successfully fulfilling their capitalist agenda.

The convergence of Baudrillard’s hyper reality with other Capitalist initiatives is evident in aspects of wider society. For example, symbols from movies and stories are branded on T-Shirts, TV series, books and theme parks (Boje 1995). ‘Reality television’ programs are further artifices that “represent the real” through the provision of symbols and images audiences associate with reality (Andrejevic 2004, p. 45). The popular support for shows such as Survivor, Big Brother and Australia’s Masterchef has been partly spurred by the efforts of television production companies to saturate audiences with commercial reality programming as a sure-fire way to generate profit (Andrejevic 2004). These examples demonstrate that the character of contemporary society is determined by the exchanges and interactions between interconnected social theories.

The casino is symbolic of gambling practices

In the following discussion, I adopt a less literal approach to the Casino by examining its inherent connection to the practice of gambling. The Star Casino is a space synonymous with gaming, chance, expenditure and addiction (Hancock 2011). In this symbolic sense, the Casino is a terrain for social interactions (Livingstone 2008). One such interaction is the individual consumer with the State (Young 2010). I contend that in the context of gambling, the encounter between the traditionally capitalist State and the individual postmodern consumer, exemplifies another example that modernism and postmodernism are coexistent. In this synergy the postmodern condition is used as a tool to fulfil the State’s capitalist agenda.

Somewhat surprisingly, the postmodern individual practices a form of consumption similar to that posited by modern capitalism. Both postmodern consumption and modern consumption involve individuals procuring products that satisfy their human needs, real or fabricated, (Boisot & McKelvey 2010). Further, both consider consumption to be a means of identifying with the cultural and symbolic meaning attached to commodities (Boisot & McKelvey 2010). While similar, the two are manifestly different in terms of the

commodities that are consumed and the social meanings attached to them (Young 2010). While modernism sees meaning in “use value” commodities produced from “hard work, thrift and savings”, postmodern individuals consume “exchange value” commodities (Young, 2010 p. 6). These are images and objects that have no intrinsic value but have been commodified during the postmodern social. The ubiquitous consumption of commodified symbols is symptomatic of what some believe to be our contemporaneous economic epoch, ‘late capitalism’ (Jameson 1991). According to Jameson (1991), the late capitalist era is defined by unprecedented levels of mass-production and is foregrounded by “commodity fetishism”(1991, p. x). That is the theory positing society’s preoccupation with the production and circulation of cultural products has evolved to a point where the “sheer production of commodity” is consumed itself (Jameson 1991, p. x). However, the exchange of ostensibly worthless commodities is not devoid of meaning (Elliot 1999). Elliot considers that the production and circulation of economically worthless commodities illuminating for it is both an exercise resultant from the shape of current social codes, and a practice in affirming them (1999, p. 113).

The practice of gambling in postmodern societies is reactionary to the “mass global commodification” (Young 2010, p. 2) of chance. Many academic claims have been made that link society’s increasing preoccupation with chance to the current social milieu of economic dissatisfaction (Young 2010; Caillois 1961; Reith 1999). According to Beck (1992), risk delineates the profile of post-industrial society; it explains the socio-political insecurity that engendered radical restructuring of labour markets during the recession in the early 90s. Similarly, Reith looks to today’s “world of high finance”, where exercises in shares and futures trading, to the abandonment of tangible production, explains how economic transactions are swayed toward “an extreme form of speculative enterprise” (1999, p. 90). Caillois sees the individual’s consumption of chance as a “nostalgic” (1961, p. 114) attempt to remedy the unfair distribution of wealth and power in capitalist societies. When viewed as a whole, the culmination gives some legitimacy to Strange’s proclamation that “the western financial system is rapidly coming to resemble nothing as much as a vast casino” (1986, p. 1). It is perhaps inevitable that in a context where chance itself forms the edifice of society, postmodern consumers willingly embrace the pure form of its dynamic: gambling (Reith 1999). By means of “symbolic circulation” (Young 2010, p. 6), widespread societal subscription to gambling ultimately ensures that the commodity of chance and the symbolism associated with it are continuously reaffirmed within the postmodern social fabric.

To the capitalist State, the practice of gambling represents little more than an opportunity to reap economic benefit. This is because the lucrative gambling industry provides another centre of private capital ownership for which the Government to regulate and secure “local tax advantages” (Gross 1998, p. 210). The State’s increased reliance on gambling revenues, especially when those revenues are earmarked to fund specific allocations of the government budget, has led to the formation of an “industrystate partnership” facilitating the growth of “large scale gambling transactions” (Livingstone 2001, p. 47). For example, aside from legalising the activity, the Government makes overt efforts to characterise gambling as a “morally-sound” national pastime (Gross 1998, p. 207). Hancock (2011) argues that the State’s attempts to sanction Casino malpractices (such as the exploitation of problem gamblers by Casinos) are pure sham. The State’s “light touch” (Hancock 2011, p. 33) approach to regulation allows the Casino’s gambling industry itself that has most

significantly facilitated its citizens' consumption of chance (Livingstone 2001). State sponsored lotteries achieve close to \$400 million in gross sales annually, yet disperse winnings at odds of 1 against double the nation's entire population (Responsible Gambling Advocacy Centre 2012). Nevertheless, slogans such as "[Y]ou can spend the rest of your life" (Lotto 2012) flood Australia's consumer space, encouraging individuals to take the chance at a near-impossible win.

In the context of gambling, the postmodern consumer and the capitalist State are inherently linked. Using the methods already mentioned, the State has successfully promoted gambling as a "celebrated form of consumption" (Young 2010, p. 6). It has effectively played to its citizens' disposition for postmodern consumption by sponsoring the very industry that makes mass consumption of chance tenable. In this way, the State seeks to propound the ideologies of postmodern consumption in the individual so as to fulfil its own Capitalist objectives.

The State's intrusion into the subjectivities of postmodern individuals is plausible in other aspects of society. Young (2010) makes the argument that the postmodern individual is free to develop beliefs in personal satisfaction, self-fulfillment and existential development. However, the individual's degree of "choice" (Young, 2010 p. 13) in such matters is inevitably repressed by the State's management of production and control of consumptive practices. As with chance, the State may assent to the commodification of any number of postmodern subjectivities, produce a demand for it, and sell the commodity to individual consumers (Young 2010). We can see that the consequences of the interactions between the State and individual, both with divergent underlying theoretical conditions, ultimately shape society to be a "messy interactive and dynamic social process" (Boisot & McKelvey 2010, p. 419).

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown that postmodernism and modernism are coexistent in practical aspects of contemporary society. I have used The Star Casino as a platform from which to explore the interconnectedness of the two social concepts and demonstrated the resultant products of their interaction. From this investigation I make the tentative conclusion that capitalist corporations and other socioeconomic entities not only dominate postmodern individuals and sensibilities, but also exploit them for practical gains. However, I ultimately deduce with some certitude that my conception that postmodernism and modernism are convergent is perhaps more and less radical than initially thought. The dynamic theoretical undercurrent of our society suggests that its framework cannot be founded on one particular social concept. It must be supported by numerous interlinked conditions that, while in constant flux, are forever changing the shape of society and infusing it with new meaning.

Notes on Contributor

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