

Reactionary Modernism: An Essay on the Post-postmodern Condition

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What is Reactionary Modernism?

As Cova, Maclaran and Bradshaw (2013) mention, the second decade of the new millennium has marked the end of postmodernism. In the past few years we have witnessed a more significant attempt at the suppression of multivocality related to knowledge (outside of the gossip and hyperpromotion found in social media), and a shift away from the cultural economy towards the monolithic, global, brand-centered, experience. The role of the aesthetic and the symbolic has given way to concrete objectification facilitated by constructed myth that supports a dogmatic, all-encompassing philosophical system.

With this ending of the postmodern era, a new age has been ushered in. Reactionary modernism incorporates the relatively new phenomena of crowdsourcing (or production by the masses for the masses) as well as the increasingly worldwide embrace of materialism (Podoshen, Li & Zhang, 2010), hyper-consumption (Kilbourne, McDonagh & Prothero, 1997), hypervocality and over-consumption (Kjellberg, 2008) practices as consumers living in many western capitalist societies are directed to consume in order to “stimulate” the economy and maintain the social order. Further, reactionary modernism is found in a global environment rife with growing nationalism and fundamentalist tendencies.

The reactionary modernist notion of knowledge shuns multivocality and moves towards univocality. It is both a protection-oriented and aggressive mechanism. While many in the western world espouse a universalist view of uncompromising human rights, gender equality and open markets, a counterinsurgency appears throughout specific pockets of extreme nationalism (see Kaplan, 2012) and anti-secularism. The one “more powerful” voice wins the day. In terms of more tangible, product-related manifestations of extreme or fundamentalist values, we can examine products like Mecca Cola, which was launched to counter the American “idyllic” Coca-Cola in the global Muslim market.

Consumption System and Signals

Shopping experiences and locales are becoming more monolithic; more homogeneous. With large real estate trusts, multi-national corporations and private equity firms (precisely focused on risk-minimization and revenue maximization) controlling much of the retail space, there appears to be only room for large, powerful and/or established brands in the sought-after retail landscape. Shopping malls and plazas in today's global environment resemble cookie-cutter consumerspaces that result from intense central planning.

Shopping for objects and its resulting materialism involve placing these objects and their acquisition at the center of life with a belief that acquiring objects leads to happiness (Podoshen and Andrzejewski, 2012). A result of this is that consumers tend to judge one's self and others in terms of what is possessed (Veer and Shankar, 2011). This process of acquisition and judgment, some argue, is key to maintaining the social order in capitalist society. For example, Veblen (1902) argued that the use of conspicuous items helps establish a social system of classification. These conspicuous goods can be used as markers for prestige and achievement (Heisley and Cours, 2007). Producers in the reactionary modern realm do not just seek consumers to consume for mere conspicuous purposes but rather to fully embrace the object and all that augments it as a "lifestyle." Products are more than just tangible products with core benefits, and they're even more than markers for social stratification.

Beneficial to Consumers?

This new consumption landscape is ultimately not beneficial for consumers. The age of postmodernism embraced diversity; embraced the individual. Risks could be taken in the global marketplace and individual passions could be indulged. Conversely, this new age of reactionary modernism puts some consumers at an untenable situation with businesses, other consumers and culture. Consumers may feel compelled to conform to consumption norms or suffer the repercussions. Consumers may be discouraged from expressing themselves in over 140 characters. Consumers may have to deal with a loss of self-expression in the face of modernist taskmasters. These are not good things for consumers.

From a more macro-level perspective, the age of reactionary modernism is strongly based on encouraging consumption – often to "stimulate" the economy. Consumers are

directed by politicians to spend and then spend some more, largely for the quick benefit of artificially inflating the perceived success of the policies of these politicians. The result is a society whereby values are based even more specifically on consumption; not consumption as self-expression or enchanted consumption, but as consumption for the greater good. It's over-consumption for the masses and the negative externalities associated with it will simply be buried, dealt with later or simply not mentioned at all. Critics of such policies may even be derided.

Finally, the rise of fundamentalist-oriented products can have significant impacts on global consumer culture. Given the conspicuousness of products like Mecca Cola, consumers engage in a signaling process to other consumers both inside and outside of the community. Some of these products may demonstrate to other consumers that the user is at the apex of the fundamentalist movement, and, in an effort to keep up with the fundamentalist Joneses, likeminded consumers may engage in consumption practices that outwardly appear to be even more fundamentalist and nationalist in nature – a hyperconsumption of fundamentalist-oriented products – or *conspicuous fundamentalism*. As with conspicuous consumption, the end result may be one that harms both consumers and society as a whole; a stratified society based outward displays of possessions related to levels of engagement with modernist and reactionary ideologies and lifestyles.

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