**Statements, Discontinuities, and Representation: Answering**

**Contentions Against Postmodernism**

“A glance at Howe's nine-point list of the ‘traits or symptoms’ of postmodern culture reveals that, for Howe, the debasement of modernist ‘symbolic economies’ has as its precise correlate a ‘postmodernist sense of hopelessness, passivity, and indeed impotence.’ The postmodernist problem, you will remember, is how to represent malaise. Just to the extent that “traditional ceremonies” are “debased into mere occasions for public display,” it seems, “passivity becomes a widespread social attitude.”¹ (emphasis mine)

Using the critical lens of Irving Howe, Herman explains that the difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the former attempts to explain the unexplainable nature of life’s abstractions, while the latter abandons this search because the search for any type of origin is fruitless—that is, there is no basis for originality because of the constructed nature of truth. Herman contends that this is a paltry excuse for postmodernism to passively explain the world’s problems off as mere spectacles. For Herman, the dilemma with postmodernism is that it seems to explain problems of representation as unsolvable and somehow forgettable.
Herman’s argument is an example of how postmodernism is often talked about in a narrow sense. This paper answers the argument based on the perspectives of four thinkers—Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, but most notably Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernard Stiegler. The charges against postmodernism I have chosen to emphasize are malaise, impotence, and passivity, since these are focal points of the preceding thinkers. In contending these criticisms, this paper demonstrates the usefulness of the postmodern approach in analyzing statements and discontinuities.

1. Foucault

In “Truth and Power,” Foucault says, “It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable, and hence capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedure.”

For Foucault, “It’s ... a matter of knowing ... what effects of power circulate among scientific statements.” Foucault contends that what is lacking for statements is the effect that power has upon them. Statements, then, are propositions that have gone through rigorous social testing and become known as discourse. Cultures are formed by statements, which are the basic unit of discourse. Here, Foucault helps us to understand what statements are and their relationship to discourse, and, as we shall see, their place in the broader sense of postmodernism.

The basis for contention is that an emphasis on abstraction contributes to malaise; however, Foucault’s approach to categorizing the world through statements should
instead be viewed as a heuristic to philosophical understanding. He says, “These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects.” Foucault resists global interpretations by replacing grand narratives with individual perspectives. This is important to realizing that discontinuities reflect branches of thought, which we can now properly understand as being social sciences. Foucault resists the idea that history can be told as a singular narrative of events, arguing for its manifestation as an unstable entanglement of sub-narratives instead.

2. Deleuze

Deleuze’s theories also contribute to the misconception of postmodern malaise. In *Foucault*, he says, “No sense of possibility or potentiality exists in the realm of statements. Everything in them is real and all reality is manifestly present. All that counts is what has been formulated at a given moment, including any blanks and gaps.” Statements mythologize in that they force us to align an analytical interpretation based on what they prescribe; while this does not negatively reflect their value, it does indicate that statements should be read as stand-alone notations. Deleuze warns us not to read beyond the lines to the extent that the meaning of the statement becomes clouded.

In a similarly cautious fashion, Deleuze points out the dangers of reading statements too broadly. He says, “Behind the curtain there is nothing to see, but it was all the more important each time to describe the curtain, or the base, since there was nothing either behind or beneath it.” Here, Deleuze defends Foucault’s belief that statements should be
viewed contextually. Ignoring the rhetoric of the statement in favor of a nonexistent larger picture, some universal Platonic ideal, is to deny the importance of the statement as a stand-alone proclamation. For Deleuze, statements are present in every text, and it is crucial that we take every text presented to us with care and consideration.

If statements are to be read on their own, what about the problem of multiple audiences? With this we shall move on to the issue of representation as discussed by Nancy.

3. Nancy

In addition to malaise, impotence is a concept brought about by Herman that infects postmodernism. In *The Ground of the Image*, Nancy argues that impotence is the result of a social obsession with violence. In the age of postmodernism, when large-scale tragedies against the human condition such as the atomic bomb, genocide, and terrorism have caused us to vitally re-think our ontologies (rather than ignore them, as Herman would suggest), modernist ideas such as the search for end-all explanations have been replaced with fragility and a turning over of the self. It should come as no surprise, then, that Nancy refers to the Shoah as the “ultimate crisis of representation.”

But what is representation according to Nancy’s analysis? Extending the Baudrillardian interpretation, he says, “Representation is not a simulacrum; it is not the replacement of the original thing—in fact, it has nothing to do with a *thing*.‘ If the fundamental difference has to do with the presence of origin, Nancy notes that the Shoah has nothing to do with any conceivable origin; thus, “It is the presentation of what does not amount to
a presence, given and completed ... or it is the bringing to presence of an intelligible reality (or form) by the formal mediation of a sensory reality.”

Representation involves a clash of what is real by what is perceived to be real—and since the tragedy of the Shoah is way beyond what the world could perceive of as being horrible before its occurrence, it changes the way that global tragedy is understood and portrayed. I argue here that tragedy becomes imaginary – imagery – imaged.

Nancy argues that the image becomes grounded as a result of what he refers to as the distinct. Stipulating the power of the image lies in its representational nature, “The image is always sacred ... Religion in itself is not ordered by the sacred ... The sacred is what it is only through its separation, and there is no bond with it. There is then, strictly speaking, no religion of the sacred ... [The distinct] is what cannot touch.”

Nancy converges the traditional meanings of sacredness and distinctness here, shifting their combined focus to distancing. That is, the image, in its sacredness, implies both a literal and figurative distance between the subject and observer. Furthermore, since the image cannot be touched, Nancy argues that religion is incapable of studying the sacred: this is due to the impossibility of worshipping that which is disassociated.

It is in this disassociation that we see the source of what mistakenly would be considered postmodern impotence: “[The distinction of the image] does not legitimize [nor] transgress; it crosses the distance of the withdrawal even while maintaining it through its mark as an image ... The essence of such a crossing lies in its not establishing a
continuity: *it does not suppress the distinction*¹¹ (emphasis mine). Owing to the disconnect between subject and object, it would appear that the distinction does nothing more than facilitate violence. While Herman may be correct to argue that violence results as a result of passivity, I venture to go a step further by arguing that the distinction is always there *awaiting answers that will be studied through several conflicting lenses.*

Nancy takes this argument in an interesting turn in “The Two Secrets of the Fetish,” in which he argues that power takes place in the form of a secret. Nancy: “The fetish becomes a double secret: the secret that critical analysis reveals as the poor monetary secret, and the secret that subsists in the intensity of a presence in so much as, as a presence, it precisely keeps its secret, and in so much as its presence is in this keeping.”¹² The Shoah is a secret that has no saving grace for its victims; the Nazis’ motivation is to have a pure race (or in Nancy’s terms, *image*), which becomes the driving motivation behind the genocide (that is, *grounding*). Furthermore, the secret inevitably exists to torture its victims. In a Deleuzian twist, Nancy contends that the secret behind the crisis of representation is an inability to connect between image and observer.

The grounding of the image is a crucial foundation to Nancy’s thinking. He says, “The image does not stand before the ground like a net or a screen. We do not sink; rather, the ground rises to us in the image. The double separation of the image, its pulling away and its cutting out, form both a protection against the ground and an opening onto it.”¹³ The image, in other words, is an active producer of meanings, despite the fact that it carries
nothing substantial in and of itself. It produces meanings by feeding off the observer, who
breathes life into it through ideological consumption. Nancy notes the concept of “double
separation” as one that simultaneously distances itself and makes a mark upon its
observer. This effect is responsible for the productive nature of the image.

Nancy’s argument goes further than a simplistic perspective on impotence. By recalling
the psychological distancing occurring between abuser and victim, we see that the power
of the image has a tendency towards abuse: “The violent person wants to see the mark on
the thing or being he assaults, and violence consists precisely in imprinting such a mark.
It is in the enjoyment (jouissance) of this mark that the ‘excess’ defining violence comes
into play.” By pointing out the sadistic pleasure a forced ideology, Nancy emphasizes
analyzing master narratives in terms of those who are being abused. Recalling Foucault,
impotence is not the end result of postmodernism but a call for action.

On this note, Nancy argues that the Shoah manifests “a complete devastation of
representation or even of the possibility of representing, to such an extent that there is not
even any way to represent this devastation or to put representation to its own test—to the
test, that is, of making what is not of the order of presence come to presence.” Since
the tragedy reflects a crisis of representation, what this means in terms of images is that it
invites observers to study the Shoah, all the while considering that it can never be
subjected to a holistic understanding. The Shoah, then, becomes likened to a postmodern
image: that is, one that lacks an origin yet necessitates analysis. This also contends
Herman’s argument against postmodernism as being apathetic to human tragedy, since analysis of such events requires a dedicated understanding to pain. As Nancy indicates, “Every image is in some way a ‘portrait,’ not in that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and draws ... in that it extracts something, an intimacy, a force.”\textsuperscript{16} Steigler examines this perspective in great detail from the vantage point of technology in \textit{Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus}, which answers the violence behind technology discussed by Nancy.

4. Steigler

By showing that crises of representation occur in conjunction with secrets, I have argued that impotence does not fit within the postmodern focus. It is now time to turn to the last of Herman’s contentions, passivity. Steigler makes the following conclusions regarding technology: \textit{1) technology is systematic and 2) technology is the result of consumerist evolution}. In concluding these ideas, I argue that passivity does not belong to postmodern thought because postmodernism necessitates a call for action.

Recalling Foucault’s notion of the social sciences invoking discontinuity, Stiegler says, “A technical system constitutes a \textit{temporal unity}. \textit{It is a stabilization of technical evolution around a point of equilibrium concretized by a particular technology ... The evolution of technical systems moves towards the complexity and progressive solidarity of the combined elements.}”\textsuperscript{17} The core of Steigler’s argument is that humans use technology to relocate themselves within the world as short-term purveyors of progress.
In other words, we seek to stabilize our surroundings through the temporary fix of technology. Just as history strives to tell an objective tale where there is none, Steigler claims technology is a stabilizing force in the midst of constant abstraction. Comparing this perspective to Foucault’s structuralist viewpoint of history, I argue that both technology and history seek to narrate organized accounts of man’s story.

Steigler’s argument finds support in Heidegger’s notion of presencing. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Heidegger explains that presencing is “that which arises and opens itself, which, as what presences, comes upon man as the one who presences.” Cautioning that the closer anyone thinks they are to understanding nature, Heidegger argues that they distance themselves from nature even more; this runs parallel to Stiegler’s unsaid implication that, in his temporal technological pursuit, man denies himself the need to dwell/question his surroundings. Through his use of the Heideggerian approach, we arrive at the first of Steigler’s conclusions: *technology should be treated as a system rather than an after-effect, or product*. Therefore we can say that technology is responsible for shaping the human condition.

At this point the refutation of postmodern passivity comes into the picture—why should we let ourselves be controlled by technology? Here Heidegger’s concept of *ereignis* is important. In an argument parallel to Foucault’s statement, “Every event must be seen so as to be fitted into this ground plan of nature. Only within the perspective of this ground plan does an event in nature become visible as such an event.” More than simply an
event, \textit{ereignis} refers to a vital issue of great consequence—one that must be addressed. Accordingly, “it is necessary to consider Heidegger’s ‘step back’ into the essence of metaphysics. Systematically viewed, this ‘step back’ is that transcendence that leads to the ‘essential origin of identity’ to which both Being and thinking belong and that Heidegger calls \textit{ereignis}” (Hoping).  

Disenchanted by the traditional approach to problem solving, Heidegger’s stress on the “essential origin of identity” mandates a call for action. Rather than apathetically viewing the problems of the world, as Herman would suggest, the postmodern concept \textit{ereignis} forces us to become objective problem solvers. Through distancing, as we have already seen with Nancy, the distinct withdrawal between subject and observer creates a perspectival gap. This is relevant to Steigler’s argument that technology systematically shapes the human condition—we are not controlled by technology: technology positions our perspectives, and it is vital that we re-territorialize ourselves within it. 

Here we come to the second of Steigler’s conclusions. He says, “The development of consumerism, accompanying constant innovation, aims at a greater flexibility in consumer attitudes, which adapt and must adapt ever more quickly, at a pace obviously not without effect on the specifically cultural sphere.” While Steigler emphasizes the cultural impact of updates on state-of-the-art technology, he makes a crucial point here in terms of flexibility: consumerism is the result of technology keeping up with the constantly evolving nature of individuals. Steigler deconstructs the deterministic attitude
“cultures become shaped as a result of technology,” instead saying *technology is the result of consumerist evolution.*

Looking past the dynamics of human change is an important aspect of Stiegler’s argument, as well as a far cry from any notion of postmodern passivity. He says, “This is what must be affirmed in the first place: that there is a full, pure origin, followed then by alteration, corruption, impurity, the fall. The nature of man is not in the way he changes. There is, there has to be, a nature of man before change.” Stiegler makes the optimistic claim that there is a human origin that can be understood. Moreover, understanding our roots allows us to determine our future. While technology allows us to cross the distance between ourselves and our origin, it is important that we never forget where we come from.

Throughout this paper I have refuted some of the criticisms against postmodern thought. In doing so, I have emphasized the power of statements to represent the abstract human condition—an abstractness that begs categorization by thinkers like Herman. Through a discussion constituting the statement (Foucault), ideology (Deleuze), the distinct (Nancy), and technology (Steigler), I have tried to show how the process of producing statements is voluble—thus, categorization can often be deeply rooted in personal ideologies and interpretations. If action is not raised as part of the postmodern calling, I will not refute that malaise, impotence, and passivity may very well become unfavorable aspects.
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3 Ibid., 112.

4 Ibid., 49.

5 Gilles Deleuze, Foucault (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988), 43.

6 Ibid., 54.


8 Ibid., 33.

9 Ibid., 33.

10 Ibid., 1.

11 Ibid., 3.


14 Ibid., 20.

15 Ibid., 34.

16 Ibid., 4.


19 Ibid., 119.


21 Steigler, *Technics and Time 1*, 32.

22 Ibid., 106.