

Mailing 2: **Romanticism/Postmodernism Concepts**

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emotional imagination/apparent reality

Research Premise

This essay is a comparative analysis of several significant art concepts related to two distinct art movements: Romanticism and Postmodernism. These art movements, separated by time and culture, both questioned and to some extent rejected the past. The art concepts here considered within these movements are genius, originality, and the sublime. The goal is to illuminate understanding of these particular issues, to better position artistic activity relative to philosophical thought. After a brief introduction to each movement, the specific concepts will be analyzed in successive sections. Following the comparative analysis, a conclusion will be proffered as a natural consequence of this investigative process.

Romanticism

Romanticism is an artistic, literary and intellectual movement that originated in the second half of the 18th century in Europe. Partly formed in reaction to the Industrial Revolution, many of its tenants are considered as precursors of modern art, thus it is still with us.¹ The term Romanticism derived from medieval heroic prose and verse narrative, such as “Beowulf”² and “The Song of Roland,”³ written in Romanic languages. Emotional experience and individual imagination are important defining characteristics. Romantic ideals include a return to nature and the inviolability of the self, considering the artist as a passionate seeker of experience.⁴ The word cloud of Figure 1 is comprised of characteristic traits associated with Romanticism, and offers an interesting way to visualize and reflect on the movement. This representational modality is useful for considering the most prominent terms.⁵

be a “fact” is the result of cultural influence.⁹ The word cloud in Figure 2 is comprised of characteristic traits associated with Postmodernism, which at a glance offers another view of its scope.

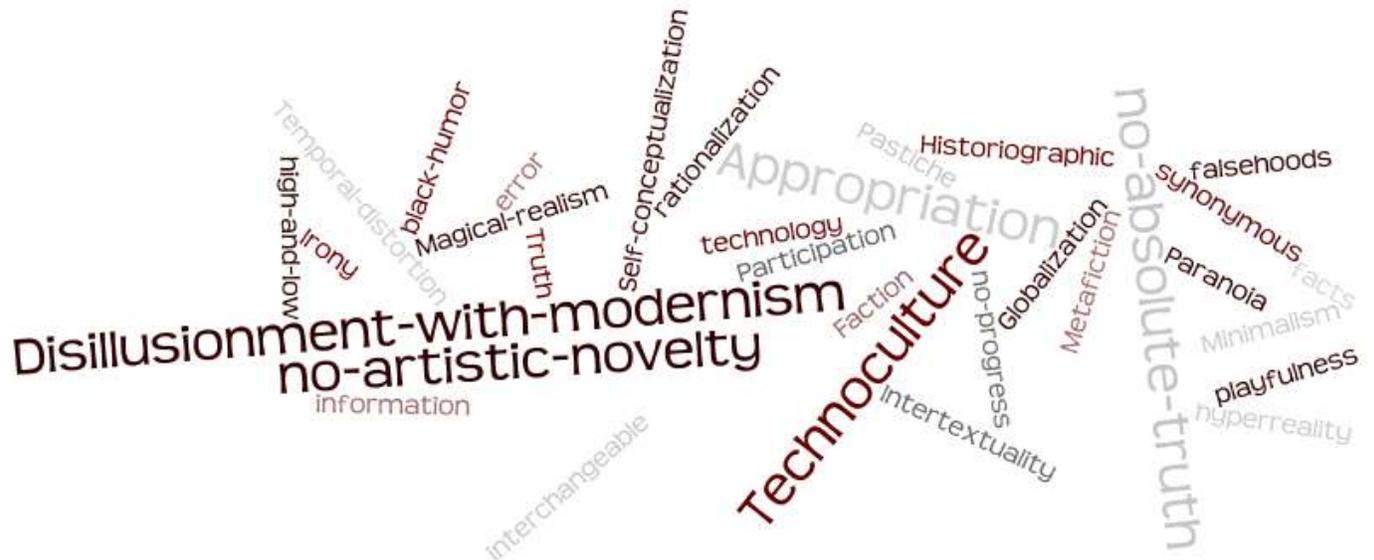


Figure 2. Postmodernism Word Cloud

Genius

The concern primarily is with the meaning the term acquired in the course of the eighteenth century as denoting the creative powers and outstanding originality of exceptionally endowed, exalted individuals. As culture is built on a foundation of the past, perhaps the most influential definition of genius is found in Kant’s Critique of Judgment.¹⁰ This description posits genius as a “mental aptitude” required to produce fine art, a capacity characterized by originality opposed to imitation. This view dominated a specific branch of the Romantic sensibility, especially the idea of man as innately good. A popular Romantic theme defines the greatness of man contrasted with the sublimity and power of nature. Arguably, this idea of a genius aptitude required for art production persists in popular notions of creativity, as well as in a “traditionalist” academic outlook.¹¹

Thus, Romanticism places an emphasis on individualism as the source of wisdom and authority, with an associated preoccupation with the genius, the hero, and the extraordinary figure.

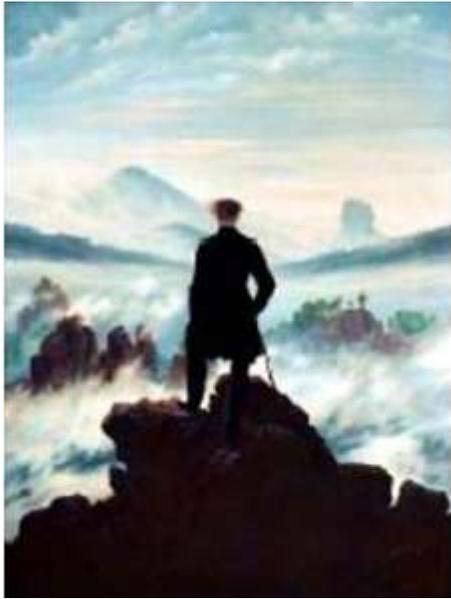


Figure 3 Caspar David Friedrich
“Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog.”

A tangible example is found in Caspar David Friedrich’s painting, “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog.”(Figure 3) In fact, Friedrich’s work is not about a social subject, but rather a nondescript figure overlooking an expansive, almost supernatural landscape. Here the landscape’s impact on the mind of the individual, with his back to us, is more important than his social position. The viewer is encouraged to assume this point-of-view; to experience subjective emotions generated by sublime grandeur. The human

subject is significant because of individual experiences and actions (in this example, the attainment of a remote and dangerous revelation.) The isolation further emphasizes individuality, compared to depictions of human civilization in other eighteenth-century representations of people and landscape.¹² Climbing high and conquering much, humanity discovers yet more infinite vistas, here shrouded in a fog concealing prospective risk.

Historical scholar Jane Kneller articulates the ascendancy of the individual by explaining, “Genius demonstrates its autonomy not by ignoring all rules, but by deriving the rules from itself.”¹³

A Romantic definition of genius is a person driven by a force beyond his or her control with an ability that surpasses the natural.¹⁴ Obviously, by this account, a genius is a privileged individual. Alexander Gerard, a philosopher active during the Romantic period, wrote in his 1759 “Essay on Taste”¹⁵ that “The first and leading quality of genius is invention.” He refined this idea later in

his “Essay on Genius,”¹⁶ proposing that while “Genius is properly the faculty of invention, it is imagination that produces genius.”

The Romantic concept of “genius” is situated as an individual functioning as a seer or visionary.¹⁷ The Romantics considered genius as superior to skill and positioned far above ability.

As the American Romantic poet James Russell Lowell would say “talent is that which is in a man’s power: genius is that in whose power a man is.”¹⁸



Figure 4 . Andres Serrano
"Piss Christ"

Postmodernism commonly takes a contrasting view of the notion of genius. Postmodern theorists generally consider the idea of individual genius as an outdated romantic mythology.¹⁹ Thus, the view that skill is inferior to imagination has lost currency. A postmodern image of genius is now defined as being more self-reflective and consequently restricted to responding to, rather than creating, durable cultural artifacts. A convincing example of this is “Piss Christ,” (Figure 4) a 1987 photograph by artist and photographer Andres Serrano, in which an image is made from a

small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s urine.

Charlie Finch, a noted columnist for Artnet.com, describes the postmodern theory on genius:

“Genius is the transformation of collective experience by one individual for the common good.

Postmodernism precludes genius because it assumes that artistic creation is a constant recycling of previous work. Consequently, genius is indeed fundamentally reactionary, because the domination of culture by one individual denies the historical power of the collective.”²⁰

Originality

King Solomon, of Ecclesiastes, about 971 BC wrote in “Ecclesiastes 1:9,”²¹ “That which has

been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.” Romanticism, however, placed a high valuation on originality over convention. This

orientation was influenced by the Enlightenment. Descartes and other Enlightenment philosophers began a slow transformation of Western culture from the model of authority to that of originality.²²

J. M. W. Turner is an artist usually associated with Romantic sensibilities whose paintings are a good example. His artworks, like “Snowstorm - Steamboat off a Harbor’s Mouth,” (Figure 5)



Figure 5. J. M. W. Turner
"Snowstorm - Steamboat off a Harbor's Mouth"

were far ahead of contemporary artistic conventions, anticipating impressionism. Turner pushed himself to achieve such originality of conception. According to his own description, he had himself tied a ship’s mast while at sea to experience snow falling about him to inspire the “Snowstorm” painting. To be sure,

Turner’s originality often was poorly

received by contemporary critics.²³ This desire for originality was well matched with the intense Romantic focus on individual consciousness.

On the other hand, in the Postmodernist culture, sequel, self-reference, adaptation, parody, and appropriation overwhelm. Originality has become a novelty item, a dated souvenir from another era. Much art today is second hand, derivative and impatiently self-aware.²⁴ Digital media suppresses the concept of unique/copy and does not rest upon the idea of originality to establish value.²⁵ Along these lines of reason, Jean Baudrillard in Simulacra and Simulation asserts that the postmodern society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is now a simulation of reality.²⁶

Umberto Eco writes on this in The Limits of Interpretation. “Much of art has been and is repetitive. The concept of absolute originality is a contemporary one, born with Romanticism; classical art was in vast measure serial, and the “modern” avant-garde (at the beginning of this century) challenged the Romantic idea of “creation from nothingness, with its techniques of collage, mustachios on the Mona Lisa, art about art, and so on.”²⁷ A great example of this is a remake of Salvador Dali’s the “Persistence of Memory,” (Figure 6) an iconic surrealist image used as the basis for one of the episodes of The Simpsons.



Figure 6 . The Simpsons
"Persistence of Memory"

Jim Jarmusch, an American independent film director, screenwriter, actor, producer, editor and composer, aptly defines the Postmodern position on originality with the following extended quote. “Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photos, poems,

dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light, and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent. And don’t bother concealing your thievery, celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: It’s not where you take things from, it’s where you take them to.”²⁸

The Sublime

The first known study of the sublime is credited to Longinus in his treatise “On the Sublime.”²⁹

Perhaps written in the 1st century AD, though its origin and definite authorship are uncertain,

“On the Sublime” is both a discourse on aesthetics and a work of literary criticism. Here the sublime is an adjective describing great, elevated, or lofty thought and language that inspires awe and admiration.

In his Critique of Judgment,³⁰ Kant investigates the sublime by saying, “We call that sublime which is absolutely great.” He differentiates between the beautiful and the sublime, claiming that beauty is connected with the form of the object, “having boundaries,” while the sublime “is to be found in a formless object,” represented by “boundlessness.”³¹

Romanticism embraced a measure of irrationality, attributed to some force beyond scientific



Figure 7 Henry Fuseli
"The Nightmare"

understanding or the laws of nature. In fact, abandonment to emotion often included exploring mental states of cognitive conflict. An example of this is Henry Fuseli’s “The Nightmare,” (Figure 7) painted in 1781. This notion of the supernatural also was evident in ideas about the sublime. The Romantic valuation of the sublime, especially as rendered in landscapes, is similarly an effort to appreciate a nature that is idealistic, unordered,

unbalanced, and asymmetrical.³² Romantic artists used the power of nature as an expression of the sublime, rendering an untamed world larger-than-life. John Martin’s painting “Assuaging of the Waters,” (Figure 8) is an example of the Romantic sublime landscape, with craggy peaks, crashing waves, and luminous light demonstrating nature’s power. It refers to an experience of rewarding anxiety when confronting wild and threatening events looming terrifyingly in our imagination.

From a Postmodernism standpoint, there has been a resurgence of interest in the sublime, with many recent articles appearing in scholarly [periodicals and journals](#).³³ Books and essays by current cultural critics such as Malcolm Budd,³⁴ James Kirwan,³⁵ and Kirk Pillow³⁶ all support perception of the sublime as being philosophically important to Postmodernism.



Figure 8 . John Martin
"Assuaging of the Waters"

Well-known for his articulation of Postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in particular, developed his themes by discussing the sublime. Lyotard stresses the notion of imagination and reason in disharmony, that the mind cannot always organize the world rationally. In The Postmodern Condition,³⁷ Lyotard addresses the importance of avant-garde art relative to a sublime aesthetic, comparing modern to postmodern constructs. Modern art is emblematic of a sublime emotional response, as “a sensibility that there is something non-presentable demanding to be put into sensible form and yet overwhelms all attempts to do so.”³⁸ However, where modern art considers the unrepresentable as something missing within a beautiful form, postmodern art promotes the unrepresentable by negating the beautiful form itself. For Lyotard, the postmodern sublime occurs as unrepresentables without reference to reason as their unifying origin. Furthermore, an artwork can become modern only if it is first postmodern. This is because Postmodernism is not Modernism at its end, but rather in its “nascent state.” So the modern becomes the postmodern at the moment it attempts to present the unrepresentable, “and

this state is constant.” The postmodern is a repetition of the modern as something “new,” and this implies constant demand for another new repetitions.³⁹

Simon Schama evokes repeatedly, in his book Landscape and Memory, the myth of Arcadia as an idyllic imaginary place, with the proposition of a fundamental difference between land and landscape. In this regard, Schama differentiates between land as a natural phenomenon in contrast to landscape as a human perceptual construct. “Before it can ever be a response for the senses,” he writes, “landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.”⁴⁰ In this regard, the landscape signifies a kind of sublime place, meant as a framework for a cultural image.

For Mario Costa, an Italian philosopher known for exploring the consequences of new technology in art and aesthetics, the concept of the sublime is important in relation to the momentous novelty of digital technology. For him, these innovative technologies are creating



Figure 9 . Edward Burtynsky
Photographs

conditions for a new kind of sublime: the technological sublime.⁴¹

Edward Burtynsky,⁴² a Postmodern Canadian photographer, has garnered international recognition for his epic photographs of industrial landscapes that explore the idea of a technological sublime.

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