

# PBS, Power & Postmodernism

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1995

The Public Broadcasting System produces “programming” toward a more manageable society. In fact, it is the network rather expressly for managers, and what it airs can best be understood by keeping in mind this service to the managing class. The exact ration of corporate to government funding of PBS is inconsequential to its basic nature and function.

Typically, it launders the image of oil giants and other corporate uglies via their tax-deductible underwriting of high culture, such as opera. Even more basically, it provides the illusion of an “independent” source of information while enforcing the dominant constraints as to what constitutes the acceptable or reputable in ideas and information.

PBS is “innovative” in one real sense: as a consistent promoter of the latest high-tech impoverishment. Those who understand the importance of the computerization of life—both Clinton and Gingrich, for instance—realize the vital PBS contribution in this area. Its completely neutered “environmentalism” never hints at questioning the hierarchical organization of social existence which daily generates the global eco-crisis. This “green” veneer serves, in practice, as perfect accompaniment to the real goal, namely, the highest “creative” productivity of capital.

PBS projects a superior code of diversity, tolerance and fairness, under which the essentials of modern, bereft, commodified life continue unaffected. This pretense of a calm, confident, rational social world is in stark contrast to the actual horrors and dislocations, psychic and public, of a stricken society. Stately British dramas like “Masterpiece Theater” further this soothing overall tone of ruling class control. Small wonder that PBS sponsors are often management services, computer firms, corporate lawyers and others whose explicit function is the running of society in important capacities.

All this is fairly transparent and hardly new. More recent is what seems to be a growing connection between PBS and the prevailing culture of postmodernism. A self-promotion spot highlights this nascent marriage between the managerial hegemony PBS aspires to and the reigning cultural hegemony of postmodernism. The text of the promo encompasses virtually every important facet of the new pm creed, and it is easy to see how it serves explicit control aims. PBS celebrates itself—and the divided society it serves—in the same oath of allegiance:

## AMERICA'S STORYTELLER

Welcome to a place that is always just

Beginning, that rouses itself day to day

And year to year to admire what it's made, starting with nothing, then rushes to invent itself all over again.

Ordinary people, doing extraordinary things; knowing what goes on now goes on to shape tomorrow.

Welcome to the land that is never exactly what you think it is and will never stay that way for long.

There are a million stories in the streets of the cities we never finish building. We intend to tell them all.

The postmodern “death of the subject” announces the end of the individual, dissolved in language. After the likes of Heidegger and Lacan, it is language itself that does the talking, which parallels the real: capital has swallowed up the human actor. And so our text begins; it is “the place” which is the subject, not its inhabitants.

This place is “always just beginning.” A remarkably bald way of expressing the postmodern refusal of history and of origins. History, after all, is just so many arbitrary fictions; pick one—or, more characteristically, don’t even bother—they are equally valid/invalid. As for origins, well, that’s a bigger fool’s errand yet. There are no origins; things have always been this way. Everything before this (media) moment is erased. This place is “always just beginning.”

And that is so admirable! This place “rouses itself—in order “to admire what it’s made.” This is the narcissism of a putrescent society in love with itself, able to focus so admiringly with the invaluable aid of know-nothing postmodernism. What it’s made of is never made clear. To enumerate the specifics of this empty place, in all their terrifying emptiness, might tend to ground the flight of this paean of admiration.

“Starting with nothing”—another reason to admire the achievements of our “place.” Here, too, is the embrace of an almost total ignorance. Self-chosen ignorance at that, which is so important to the fact of “postmodern culture” as oxymoron. “Starting with nothing.” Never mind the unsuspecting peoples who had to be systematically sacrificed to enable the admirable wonders of today. Never mind the wondrous part of this planet that existed, naturally and freely, somehow prior to the glories erected by this “place.” “Starting with nothing.” No blood on anyone’s hands.

Skipping over the innocuous stanza, “Welcome to the land that is never exactly what you think it is.” Here is another cardinal postmodern tenet: the pointlessness of analysis. Meaning is an illusion, or, as the pm deconstructionists say, “all interpretation is misinterpretation.” In practice, the corollary is, let the experts run things; their rule and technology are inevitable and unfathomable, anyway. The Information Society, the dream of managers and their PBS, “is never exactly what you think it is.” You are incapable, by definition, of understanding your subjugation to power. So sit back, tube out, and we’ll perfect it.

This land also “will never stay that way [the way you mistakenly thought it was] for long.” More classic postmodernism: ever-shifting signification, undecidability. Of course it is fine that the situation is both opaque and fluid: this guarantees your perpetual ignorance and slavery.

“The streets of the cities we never finish building.” Capital and its high-tech embodiment dwarf you, and never rest. This “place” goes on forever. The contribution of postmodernism to PBS is inestimable, as this piece of pure pm makes utterly clear.

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Fifth Estate #346, Summer, 1995

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