

EGIDIJA RAMANAUSKAITĖ

SUBCULTURE AND POSTMODERNISM: REFLECTIONS OF GLOBAL IDEAS IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The paper focuses on the manifestation of postmodernism in contemporary culture. The concept is used in academic literature “to refer to certain styles in art, architecture and design, to forms of literary fiction, theater, dance, music, to philosophical ideas and scholarly views, to organizational structures (or non-structures) and as an all-encompassing label for the present age” [10, 190]. In this article the special emphasis is on an interaction between a popular culture and subcultures. This interaction is understood as a dynamic process involving integration of cultural ideas; it also manifests an opposite tendency of individualization in society and culture. The paper reflects theoretical discourses of a contemporary theory of culture, explicated by James-François Lyotard, Ihab Hassan, Paul Ricoeur, Johan Fornäs, Douglas Kelner, Mike Featherstone, and others. It also relies on the empirical data, collected by the author during 1998–2001 and 2003¹ in Lithuania, primarily inquiring how contemporary ideas of postmodernism influence local subcultural communities.

Key words: subculture, popular culture, postmodernism.

Traits of late modernity

Postmodernism, as a late phase of modernism, manifested in the 1960s in Western Europe. It appeared on a social level through various subcultural groups and movements such as hippies, punks, mods, scooter-boys, and others. The Western idea of subcultural resistance was adapted by subcultural youth of the Soviet region. Youth subcultures reflected an ideological context of the 1960s Soviet society and the later Soviet period, which continued until 1990. Thereby

¹ Empirical research data consists of 100 semi-structured interviews with subcultural group members, 49 descriptions and video recordings (or photographs) of traditional rituals, holidays and parties, and 170 questionnaires.

they achieved originality. After 1990, new subcultural groups such as goths, pagan metalists, Romuva groups of ancient religions and others questioned new social problems.

Postmodernism can be viewed as an individual style of world perception. It is an open philosophic system, which includes the topicality of an interaction between individuality and society. What ideas, formed by a local subculture, does global postmodern ideology and world-view influence? Most significant could be that attention is shifted from the collective to the individual in various areas, especially spiritual culture.

The global perspective is that post-modern culture demonstrates tendencies of returning to the beginning of modernism, when universally accepted attitudes in culture, especially art, are rejected and new views originate. Once originators of culture deny normative traditions of modernism, they look for a new life experience and new means for self-expression. Postmodernism is close to romanticism, which declares a particular individual experience [Kubilius 1993, 107].

According to J.-F Lyotard [8], postmodernism marks a distrust of all explanatory schemes. It also declares chaos of the world, eclecticism. Postmodernism is also explained as a higher level of societal life, determined by the technocratization and computerization of society, which expands communications between people. However, the problem of postmodernism is first related with self-consciousness and outlooks of individuals, when values that were important in the past are lost [1, 30]

Phenomenon of popular culture and subcultures

A contemporary popular culture is considered the most evident expression of postmodernism. It associates with superficiality, fluid forms, and fragmentary meanings. In this context, F. Jameson [7] discusses the death of a cultural individual in a world of consumption. Literarily, popular culture is understood as "the culture of people, often not made by them, but made for them and identified as theirs by the culture industries" [9, 236].

An impression emerges that a popular culture demonstrates generally consistent patterns of modernism and postmodernism interchanges. Ongoing change is related with people's endeavors to negate stiff cultural forms, unification, excessive organization, and dependence on the law of the market. Thusly, sub-cultural phenomena form, manifesting alternative ideas to a pop culture.

Frequently subcultures, such as various resistant youth groups like *punks*, *metalists*, and *goths*, are outgrowths of a popular culture, simultaneously oppositional to it. The search for deeper self-orientation and self-manifestation is a significant idea, determining the originality of subcultures. Vanguard ideas become incorporated in a pop cultural field as soon as the mass media absorbs them. Hence, the youth culture, which formed in America in the mid-20th century, reflected constantly changing forms of popular music from melancholic blues, originating from the black population, to rock music, heavy metal, punk rock, hardcore, and so forth. A need for expressions of moods by musicians becomes a reason for finding a new lifestyle.

The origins of subculture could be understood as the post-modern, moving from a human "me", as a social function, toward a "me" that is understood as a steady entity [13; 14]. A subculture withdraws from the wider society, becoming a closed community, which can be understood through personal perception. The main characteristic of this phenomenon is a search for an individual experience and a personal consciousness of the world. This way, groups of people are consolidated by formation of "spiritual niches" in which investigators of hippies, for example, envision that the greatest affluence in life is an affluence of interaction.

Important is to stress a main contradiction in contemporary culture. This culture connects fragmentary and eclectic everyday routines with a demand to overcome alienation and a search for harmony. A discourse of postmodernism, discussed by Ihab Hassan, could be a philosophical background of such phenomena. Ihab Hassan explains an indeterminacy and immanence of postmodern culture [5, 90–91]. Indeterminacy links to fragmentation, while immanency determines a wholeness, a globalization, a quest for creation of a life world in new symbolical languages – words, writing, art, architecture, and fashion.

Obvious examples are youth subcultural groups, which form in an environment of a popular culture, where individual experience and authentic self-expression are major values. In such an environment, a search for a way to communicate with the surrounding world is equally as important as for the evident need to perceive and evaluate it.

In a given discussion on a popular culture and subculture, there are key contradictions. On one side, there is a tendency of negation, and from the other, a tendency of seeking new creative work. This problem becomes particularly clear when analyzing the latest subcultural phenomena in a contemporary culture.

Postmodern reflections

Ideas that manifest in local subcultural life could be distinguished from the global ideas of late modernism. Notable among them could be an ethics of negation, a value of novelty, a new understanding of tradition, prominent status to the philosophy of freedom, changing normative cultural taste, higher valuation of modern cultural self-expression, and others. One way or another, the aforementioned manifest in the entire history of culture. In new, current cultural situation, they assume new meanings, and a subjective factor becomes more essential.

Liberation of aesthetics

Various phenomena of contemporary culture are coherent with the liberalization of aesthetics. A *'freedom for'*, discussed by Nikolaj Berdiajev [11, 376], is related with perfection and a beauty of God, whereas a *'freedom from'* veers toward a marginal individualism, which is oriented to negation. The issue of harmony between the human and society is basic in this case. Aesthetics is dissociated from politics, economics, theology, and ideology, and various aesthetical rules of style and genre [3, 37]. Postmodernists, the same as modernists, try to erase the contrast between art and life by trying to present the world in a subjective way, based on personal reflections. A grotesque, a travesty, a parody of reality is a mask of the authors, and inherent to a post-modern culture [6]. Deformation of cultural genres, a carnival, the comic, a metaphor, and symbolism are traits, common to goth, punk, metalist, and other subcultures. Consequently, post-modernism is a controversial phenomenon of culture; individuals mask their own human spirit under an external image.

Highly important to the period is an endeavour by an individual and the entire culture to surmount eclecticism, perceive a meaning of nature and self, analyse the origin, orient to the spiritual memory of humanity, and exceed the interior powers of man. Contemporary art, new cultural communities, and social movements demonstrate all such traits. When ethic norms, constructed by authorities, become questionable, a sense of negation along with resistance and nihilism arises. Lively, derisive, and flexible expressions and mannerisms become appreciable. Psychology of mannerism is represented by narcissism, a trait that J. Friedman envisages in forms of contemporary identity [4, 331–366].

Mythologization of culture

Mythologization is a trait, common to popular culture and a subculture. It is evident in modern literature, the interest of contemporary society in occultism and magic, manifesting in environments of pagans, witches, soothsayers, magicians, and the like. A mythological sense of world is also common to the worldview of the contemporary person. In contemporaneity, the ordinary analysis is as an artistic experience or ritualistic creation, when a person seeks an individual touch with the environment through various mythologems. Myths that are common to a contemporary culture are explained as models of behaviour, an intuition of a meaning of life, or spontaneous creative acts. The most perspective conception of myth seems to be a process of individual creation, when a creative person moves away from a mass psychology [12, 18].

An idea of neo-mythology consists of a dualism of imagination and reality along with a touch of life and art. Thus, ritual can be understood as a ritualistic game, which can even take on a religious or mystical nature. Literary and imagined myths, regarding the feats of the ancient Lithuanians, and the struggles and victories of ancestors form the so-called Pagan worldview. This worldview also contains numerous Western ideas about Paganism. Expressions of such a worldview include avant-garde art forms and stylised arrangements, such as metal music, and the projection of an everyday and a stage appearance. Because they believe that they are carrying forth their own ethnic traditions, members of the underground deny the continuation of traditional concepts. Ideas of neo-mythology are evident not only in neo-paganistic rituals, but also in a contemporary environment of youth dance parties, where the impact of electronic rhythm and sound effects spiritual liberation.

The basis of the aesthetization of contemporary culture is individual enjoyment of symbolism, a desire to formalize senses. According to Ernst Cassirer, symbolic forms (such as myth, religion, language) indicate our contact with the universe, create our own reality [2]. Symbolism of contemporary subcultural communities consists of music, dance, a style of behaviour, slang, and clothing. All this and many other aspects interconnect into mythologem structures, which characterize punks, pagans, goths, hippies, and other subcultural heroes. A subculture expresses many topicalities of time, as well as a variety of value orientations and outlooks by symbolical images.

Ethics of negation and subcultural conflicts

According to D. Hebdige, post-modern ethics of negation could be discussed in relation with the rejection of Marxism "as a total explanatory system" [6, 186]. It is also related with abandonment of all bureaucratic organizations, which are based on collective principles [ibid., 186–188]. The author separates three kinds of postmodernism: antimodernistic, which is inclined to nihilism; neoconservative, which links to a new totalitarianism of thinking, a seeking for new authorities; and the critical, which proclaims repair through criticism of the old. Critical postmodern consciousness manifests in various actions by a contemporary local society. Criticism is evident in such late styles of subcultures as goths, neopagans, and the ethnocultural community Romuva. A good example could be a phenomenon of the "underground", for example, the hippy subculture, which describes cultural and ideological resistance of postwar communities. It was regarded as a subculture rebelling against conventional society. The investigation of meanings related to the cultural underground of 1990s, ascribed by members of subcultural groups such as *pagan metal* and *disc jockeys* are relevant to the analysis of conflicting fields in contemporary Lithuanian society. Reactions of respondents to contemporary society highlight traits, such as rationalization, bureaucracy, and standardization, as well as physical and moral violence that adults and coevals exercise.

Subcultural individualism and rapid dissemination of subcultural groups in different cultural spheres are frequent tendencies in modern culture. Empirical research was performed to explore this with specific focus on interrelated fields, including arts, academia, religion, and folklore in which conflicting subcultures exist that by their own right disseminate into different genres and directions. The most popular and the most active of these subcultures is the *metal music underground*. This trend is characterized by several orientations, the first being a style of black metal associated with black philosophy that seeks applicable aesthetic expression. The second is the aforementioned *pagan* orientation in which ideas are expressed through a philosophy encoded in lyrical songs about battles and victories of ancestors and through a romanticized perception of the past, as well as through music-induced meditation and a belief in magic merging with nature. The third is *gothic metal*; sadness and romanticized melancholy base its philosophy. Common to the aforementioned trends are stylistic expressions, manifested by external phenomena such as long hair and dark clothes, free life style, and metal music.

The *underground* phenomenon can be regarded as a symbolic expression of cultural conflict in contemporary society. Each cultural subgroup sets itself in opposition to dominant cultural standards, operating within a broader cultural sphere. The need to create one's own meanings of culture determines the diversity of created cultural forms.

Members of the *underground* envision themselves as different from, what they regard as, "ordinary or less educated members of society." The emphasis on ideals, creative activities, and a free lifestyle enforces the demarcation between the youth underground and society. The respondents define their relationship with society in the following terms: "If the *overground* did not exist, the *underground* would not exist, either." The youth foreground ideas that are in opposition to the dominant culture. For example, such traits of culture as individuality and originality become an oppositional to standards of the popular culture. The perception of the *cultural underground* reflects resistant consciousness of the times and indicates spheres of conflicts in culture. Although the impact of popular culture on the *underground* is particularly significant, ideas of the *cultural underground* show a clear transition from the systematic rules of culture to internal self-regulation. Informal, dynamic, and flexible identities and organizational structures form as alternatives to the official ones.

Conclusions

The ideas of postmodern philosophy and art manifest in contemporary popular culture and subculture. Local subcultural groups reflect global philosophical ideas of time. The most unique turned to individualization, manifested in subcultural communities, which arises as a confrontation of individuals to contemporary processes in the unification of a popular culture.

The research substantiates that the ideas of the *avant-garde*, Western youth influenced the growth of youth subcultural communities in Lithuania. The ideology and forms of these communities are very similar. Lithuanian groups, however, preserve a pronounced cultural originality, which is related with the cultural isolation during the Soviet period. The observed subcultural groups are not only indicative of the dynamic tendencies in Lithuanian culture, but also stimulate changes of customs, cultural values, and norms.

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Egidija Ramanauskaite
Subkultūra un postmodernisms.
Globālo ideju atspoguļojums lokālajās kopienās

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā analizētas postmodernisma (īpaši postmodernisma filozofijas un postmodernisma mākslas) idejas subkultūru kopienās. Populārās kultūras un subkultūru mijiedarbība tiek aplūkota kā dinamisks process, kura pamatā ir kultūras ideju integrācija. Vienlaikus tiek aplūkota arī pretēja tendence – individualizācija sabiedrībā un kultūrā, kas rodas, indivīdiem konfrontējot ar apkārtējo vidi, it īpaši ar populāro kultūru.

Subkultūru kopienu (hipiji, panki, goti, metālisti, etnokultūras kopiena "Romuva" u.c.) empīriskie pētījumi, kurus autore veikusi 1998.–2001. un 2003. gadā Lietuvā, rāda, ka Rietumu jaunatnes avangarda kultūras idejas ir ietekmējušas subkultūru kopienu skaita pieaugumu Lietuvā. Tajā pašā laikā grupām, kas darbojas Lietuvā, ir raksturīga nepārprotama etniskā savdabība, kas saistīta ar padomju periodam raksturīgo kultūras izolāciju. Subkultūru kopienas ne tikai atspoguļo lokālās kultūras dinamiskās tendences, vienlaikus tās ietekmē pārmaiņu procesus sabiedrībā valdošajās kultūras vērtībās un normās.