Superconsumer, a postmodern romance

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Introduction

"Postmodernism" is a key word today, wielded by philosophers, cultural theorists, artists, people in the media, and intellectuals in general. When most people talk about postmodernism, they envisage the revolutionary imagery of our life and times—information revolution, hyperglobalisation, and consumerist culture—and they herewith *feel* the risks, anxieties, and ills associated with life in these unsettling times. Most people would be surprised to learn then, that in stark contrast to their pejorative understanding of the word, some philosophers have exalted postmodernism as the age of individual enlightenment and salvation. In his monograph, *The Postmodern Condition,* Jean-François Lyotard (1984) hailed postmodern man as a hero—an individual who has overcome the powers of the state by achieving a state of understanding and wisdom about the nature of knowledge. Even Fredric Jameson, one of the most vocal critics of postmodernism distress, has alluded to this heroic figure in his hope for a "new international proletariat" (1991). Herein lies a conundrum—how could one word embody such opposite visions? In this essay, I attempt an unlikely explanation—it is precisely our exposure to the confusion and excesses of postmodern culture that provokes us to resist it, defy it, and eventually overcome it. Taking consumerism as a metonym for our postmodern culture, this essay traces steps in how enlightened individuals can effloresce out of typical consumerist experience—these heroes are the *superconsumers,* the protagonists of our time.

Forget for a moment the ills that consumerism has afflicted on society. Since postmodern enlightenment concerns the state of knowledge, let us focus on "consumerism" more generally, through a semiotic lens, as the consumption of cultural information (*signs*) and of cultural information systems (*sign systems*). Within this framework, we dream up a story about the ascension of a naïve consumer into superconsumer. In the beginning, there was a consumer who was naïve—an unaware servant to the cultural values and desires that were imposed upon him. But he was bombarded with cultural teachings from all directions—popular culture from television and film advocated one set of values, but family's heritage and culture prescribed another set of values. The burden of these teachings and their incoherent sea of messages was extreme. Soon

the consumer became desensitised and sceptical. Like a teenager discovering hypocrisy in his parents' teachings, the consumer compared the cultural messages pushed onto him. First he discovered their inconsistency and contradictions. Then the spark of awareness will be lit—that these cultural realities are simulations, and none of them have more authority or truth than any other. Cultural knowledge is not fact but merely widespread belief and story. At last the consumer breaks his allegiance to culture and swears allegiance to his inner being. He continues his ascent to superconsumer—consciously creating his own values and identity by turning culture from an authority into a servant and a material to draw from and exploit.

The rest of this essay elaborates on the becoming of the superconsumer by spinning three tales. The first tale, "Bricoleur, intertextuality, and beyond," recounts how philosophers of the postmodern have presaged the rise of the superconsumer. The second tale, "In-credible culture," suggests that a consequence of hyperglobalisation in the late twentieth century was culture's loss of credibility and authority. This lays fertile ground for the third tale, "Unlocking cultural poetics," which tells of three critical experiences that are rites of passage for heroic superconsumer, propelling him to transcend cultural authority and attain an individual enlightenment.

Bricoleur, intertextuality, and beyond

The story of the superconsumer is that every naïve consumer can be awakened and freed from the authority of culture through critical experiences—cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and perspectivism. What is interesting is that particular stages of the superconsumer's journey can be traced to the writings of almost all philosophers of the postmodern. The three most interesting of these stories are Lévi-Strauss and Derrida's story of the *bricoleur*, Jameson's story of postmodern *intertextuality*, and Bhabha's story of *beyond.* Each tells of a different key stage in becoming superconsumer.

In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Claude Lévi-Strauss introduces a character called *bricoleur*. Like a handyman who is a jack-of-all trades but master of none, the bricoleur lives life as a generalist—he thinks a little about this, he thinks a little about that. The opposite of the bricoleur is the engineer, who is a specialist and thinks a lot about only one thing, and in only one way. The engineer is often viewed as a symbol of the knowledge achievement of modern society, while the bricoleur is often derided as primitive and unsophisticated. Jacques Derrida, however, turned the tables on the usual view. In his 1966 lecture on *deconstruction*—a cornerstone strategy for challenging the authority of modern knowledge—Derrida pronounced that the engineer was actually the fool, a victim to the illusion of certainty perpetrated by modern society. In fact, the bricoleur is the heroic one—his opportunistic approach allows him to not only survive our inherently unstable and confused cultural

world, but even to defy it; hence he achieves a mythopoetical power. In contrast, the engineer cannot cope with the inconsistencies of a globalised culture, and being riddled with cognitive dissonance and fear of hypocrisy, he will ultimately give up. The account of bricoleur and engineer invites comparison with our superconsumer story. Every naïve consumer begins as an engineer, initially reverent to cultural authority, and mistaking cultural beliefs for infallible truths. While many of these consumers will live and die without ever questioning cultural authority, some will be transformed through uncomfortable experiences that awaken their minds to a strange realisation—that each culture, its values, and its knowledge are myths-refined-by-time rather than facts, and are built on quicksand, not on bedrock. Awakening is an uncomfortable process that can cause one to feel lost and stuck in an existential quandary. But the most courageous and opportunistic engineers can transform into daring bricoleurs who master the rules of many cultures, and use each culture's rules to undermine the rules of every other culture. This is the art of *cultural criticism*, and a vital skill shared by bricoleur and superconsumer.

If the values of every culture and belief system were individual texts, then the bricoleur jumps opportunistically from text to texts—he is *intertextual.* However, unless Derrida's proactive bricoleur, Jameson's protagonist, who we call the *intertextualist*, is overwhelmed and has not yet found the courage to make sense of the massive globalised culture. Jameson's *intertextualist* thus marks an earlier point in the journey to superconsumer—he is the naïve consumer bombarded by cultural teachings from all directions, but he is beginning to awaken because he is increasingly desensitised to this sea of cultural messages. In "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," (1998) Jameson describes postmodernism as an era when we are always swimming between different cultures and images. He is greatly alarmed by this development—citing *pastiche*, or dry parody, and schizophrenia of imagery as two unwelcome and unsettling realities of today. Jameson frets that pastiche, the free mixing of cultural styles and motifs, is a mode of expression that has lost its soul and approaches meaninglessness:

> "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor: pastiche is to parody what that curious thing, the modern practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the stable and comic ironies of, say, the 18th century." (Jameson 1998, 5)

Jameson foregrounds a frightening side of our postmodern reality. To experience pastiche, one needs simply to turn on a television and flip from channel to channel—the old black and white films that once were so great, now seem two-dimensional compared with colour films and special effects; late-night infomercials disguise themselves as talk shows and interviews—are they presenting information or selling products? Taking the blurring effect of pastiche to the extreme—as if one were to change the television channel quickly enough--Jameson describes postmodern life as a schizophrenic experience where meaning degrades into images:

> "As meaning is lost, the materiality of words becomes obsessive, as is the case when children repeat a word over and over again until its sense is lost and it becomes an incomprehensible incantation. To begin to link up with our earlier description, a signifier that has lost its signified has thereby been transformed into an image." (*ibid.*, 11)

Jameson's intertextualist is nauseated by the postmodern mesh of clashing cultures and consumerist propaganda, and is overwhelmed by feelings of "unreality." But disorientation and saturation are necessary milestones in any journey to enlightenment—they plant the seed of discontent. The moment when cultural narratives are seen as pastiche, like different channels on a television, is the moment that cultural messages have begun to lose their authority in the consumer's eye. Soon, even intertextualists will reform their victim mentality, and start to scrutinise culture's flood of messages. They may even return to exploit pastiche for its art, creating surrealistic hypertext adventures such as auteur David Lynch's "Twin Peaks." Jameson himself may have expressed hope for such courageous future persons, truly at ease with the sea of culture, by predicting the rise of a "new international proletariat."

Jameson's intertextualist is in a sea of culture, but often he feels that he is drowning. Derrida's bricoleur uses one culture's rules to undermine another culture's rules, but he is still fighting off cultural authority. In Homi Bhabha's notion of the "beyond" exists a hope for individual enlightenment that surpasses both the intertextualist and the bricoleur. The hero of Bhabha's beyond has transcended rebellion; rather than shifting between cultures, he lives completely in the cultural 'in-between'. In "The Location of Culture," (1994) Bhabha described the beyond as a place for wilful creation of self:

> "What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.
>
> "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or

> communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." (Bhabha 1994, 1)

But where is this in-between and how can a bricoleur find this space? Bhabha gives away the secret—it is located in "those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences." The bricoleur is accustomed to undermining one culture's teachings with the teachings of another, but if he were to focus on the difference between the two teachings and let that space of difference fill his imagination, a continuum of a thousands possible teachings would appear. Thus, to *be in-between* the space of difference affords even greater freedom than rebellion. On the trajectory to becoming superconsumer, the shift from bricoleur to Bhabha's individual of the beyond marks an important transformation.

In-credible culture

The late twentieth century saw a period of hyperglobalisation that brought all of the world's major cultures together into a commodity and exchange framework. While the mutual juxtaposition of the world's cultures increased cultural access, it has also invited cultural comparison and criticism that challenges the very credibility and authority of 'culture' itself. The credibility of culture has always been based in the idea of the 'tribe'—its values and belief systems were palatable to its people because those were grounded in shared ethnic and geo-political traits. However, in our contemporary period, society's tribal boundaries are actively being redrawn—boundaries need no longer correspond solely to geo-political and ethnic boundaries, they may also consider shared aesthetics and sensibilities. For example, supported by mass media and the world wide web, there is now an extensive landscape of *niche cultures* such as 'gamers', 'queer culture', 'trekkies', and 'hip hop culture'—these tribes are gaining momentum and credibility, but still lack the tenure and heritage oust traditional cultures outright. Meanwhile, the tribes of the pre-globalised world—that were based on ethnic, nation-state, religious and class boundaries—are quickly losing relevance, credibility, and authority.

What this means is that the world is at an in-between moment where there exists a vacuum of cultural authority. While this resonates with Jameson's sentiment that postmodernism is a confusion, we should also see this as an opportunity for the individual. At a historical moment when society is reconfiguring its cultural landscape, individuals have the possibility of viewing culture not as something one is born into or is obliged to, but as a resource to be exploited and pursued, not unlike the pursuit of one's happiness. Not all individuals will recognise or seize the opportunity right away—many will continue to consume passively. For example, in

the world's new urban centres, cosmopolitanism has emerged as a commerce-based culture that, *prima facie,* incorporated much of the globe's cultural offerings. Many consumers are dazzled by the diversity of the cosmopolitan culture, but do not realise the degree to which their consumption is being manipulated by the powers that be; nor do they realise the artificiality of cosmopolitanism's "dumbing down" of the world's original cultures into fad commodities. These consumers will feel unsatisfied with the lack of actual depth in cosmopolitan culture, yet they will herewith be unable to accurately pinpoint the cause of this vague angst. The superconsumers amongst them will overcome this passive consumption—they will realise that there are other cultures out there that can captivate them with credibility and authority and they will actively seek these out.

Let us not be confused. Superconsumers do not reject culture; if anything, it is naïve consumers who grow indifferent to the ineffective cultures that mainstream society has imposed upon them. Superconsumers instead overcome this apathy, and seek out the cultures that will fulfil and captivate them best. The German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel once described the struggle of individuals to become fulfilled persons as a problem of an amorphous, unknowable inner being trying to rediscover itself in known forms of the social and cultural world. He concluded that an ideal and most fulfilled result would be for individuals to cloth themselves in very specific cultures which best fit their inner beings, and he called this idea "collective individuality" (Simmel 1908). Superconsumers are actively pursuing their collective individualities by seeking out the niche cultures that resonate with them and the ensemble of these cultures that fulfil their inner being. According to Simmel, collective individuality fulfils because it satisfies two basic and dichotomous human drives—the impulse to *integrate* with others, and the simultaneous need to *differentiate* oneself—by allowing integration with the few likeminded individuals of the niche culture, while differentiating oneself from the mainstream. We think of superconsumers as having fulfilled both drives; however, naïve consumers of cosmopolitan culture fall short of achieving integration, since integration is only afforded by cultures that are credible and authoritative; we have already suggested that cosmopolitan culture is not credible or authoritative because it is fabricated by mass production and mass media and because it lacks depth and real community.

Simmel's words may explain *why* a superconsumer's quest is likely to be fulfilling, but we should also ask *how* it is that a superconsumer's self-constructed cultural smorgasbord fulfils. We locate an explanation in psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's famous understanding of culture as a language. In "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," (1957) Lacan suggested that this language fundamentally shapes what thoughts are thinkable:

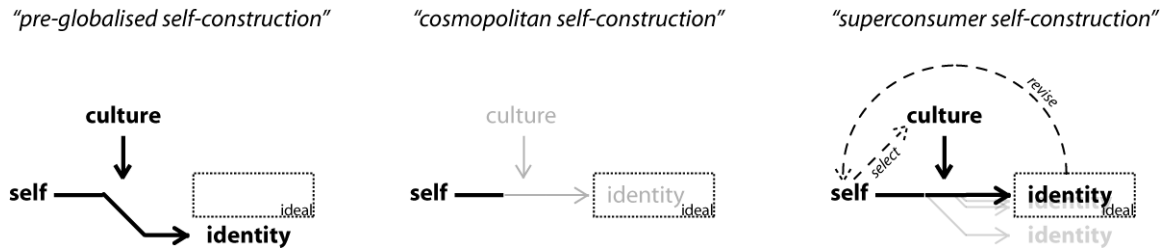

Fig. 1. Cultural authority, cultural selection, and their impact on self-construction.

> "Reference to the experience of the community, or to the substance of this discourse, settles nothing. For this experience assumes its essential dimension in the tradition that this discourse itself establishes. This tradition, long before the drama of history is inscribed in it, lays down the elementary structures of culture. And these very structures reveal an ordering of possible exchanges which, even if unconscious, is inconceivable outside the permutations authorized by language.
>
> "With the result that the ethnographic duality of nature and culture is giving way to a ternary conception of the human condition - nature, society, and culture - the last term of which could well be reduced to language, or that which essentially distinguishes human society from natural societies." (Lacan 1957, I)

Supposing that we following Lacan and believe that culture is a language which determines the range of self-expression, we can make some additional observations about the process of a person constructing his identity. A culture is authoritative if and only if it has a rich and compelling language. An authoritative culture yields an authoritative identity. A person cannot "speak" his ideal and most fulfilling identity unless his cultural languages permit it. Combined with Simmel's insight, these observations enable us to now explain how it is that a superconsumer's self-construction is more fulfilling than the self-construction of a naïve consumer in cosmopolitan culture, and more fulfilling that the self-construction of a person in the pre-globalised world.

First, a person of the pre-globalised world was shaped by a few authoritative cultures—ethnic culture, national culture, religious culture, class culture—but these did not fit his inner being well, so his identity frustrated him (Fig. 1, left pane). Second, a person of the cosmopolitan culture is shaped by many non-authoritative cultures, but these do not constitute a very rich or credible language, so his resulting identity is frustratingly shallow (Fig. 1, middle pane). Third, a superconsumer who is initially shaped by some cultures arrives at an intermediate identity, but he possesses a feedback

loop—he continuously refines and evolves his identity toward his ideal by seeking out cultural languages to shape himself by (Fig. 1, right pane). He seeks niche cultural languages that are rich and have authority, but he reserves the right to select those cultural languages. Effectively, the superconsumer submits himself to a controller, yet paradoxically he controls the controller.[1]

In the wake of hyperglobalisation, many of the world's original ethnic and geopolitical cultures now suffer a lapse in relevance, credibility and authority, and are being reduced to caricatures in the new cosmopolitan culture. Niche cultures based on new tribes of individuals sharing interests and sensibilities have gained credibility and strength, and are beginning to fill the authority vacuum. Yearning to overcome the in-credible and artificial cosmopolitan culture, superconsumers are beginning to emerge—they are painting their own credible cultural landscape and have taken responsibility for their self-construction and their own fulfilment.

Unlocking cultural poetics

The core step in the superconsumer's becoming is his encounter with the mechanical structure of culture itself—once that is known, culture loses its power to oppress, and must instead prove itself worthy of being adopted by the individual. The mechanism of culture constitutes a *poetics* because a certain sense of that word refers to the laws governing poetry. Cultural poetics, then, are the laws governing the creation of a self from cultural materials. We select, from the multitude of possible cultural experiences, at least three experiences that are critical (pun intended) to unlocking cultural poetics—multicultural experience, cosmopolitan experience, and perspectival experience. Each critical experience is capable of opening a consumer's eyes to the perils and affordances of cultural knowledge.

In multicultural experience, an individual who is accustomed to one native culture enters a new environment that is governed by one or more host cultures. This, for example, encompasses the immigrant experience and the experience of diaspora. In this experience, the values and beliefs of the native culture have legitimacy because they had dominated much of the individual's life. However, the host culture also has authority because it embodies the rules of survival in the new environment. Wanting to preserve the native culture while simultaneously pursuing the host culture, an individual enters a period of adaptation; immigrants, for example, may find

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[1] The idea of a self who simultaneously submits and controls can be traced back to ancient philosophies, especially to Buddhism, and to Stoicism. The idea of culture and feedback loops affecting self-construction is explored in an extensive body of literature in sociological systems theory on *autopoiesis* (self-creation), owed to Niklas Luhmann and his followers.

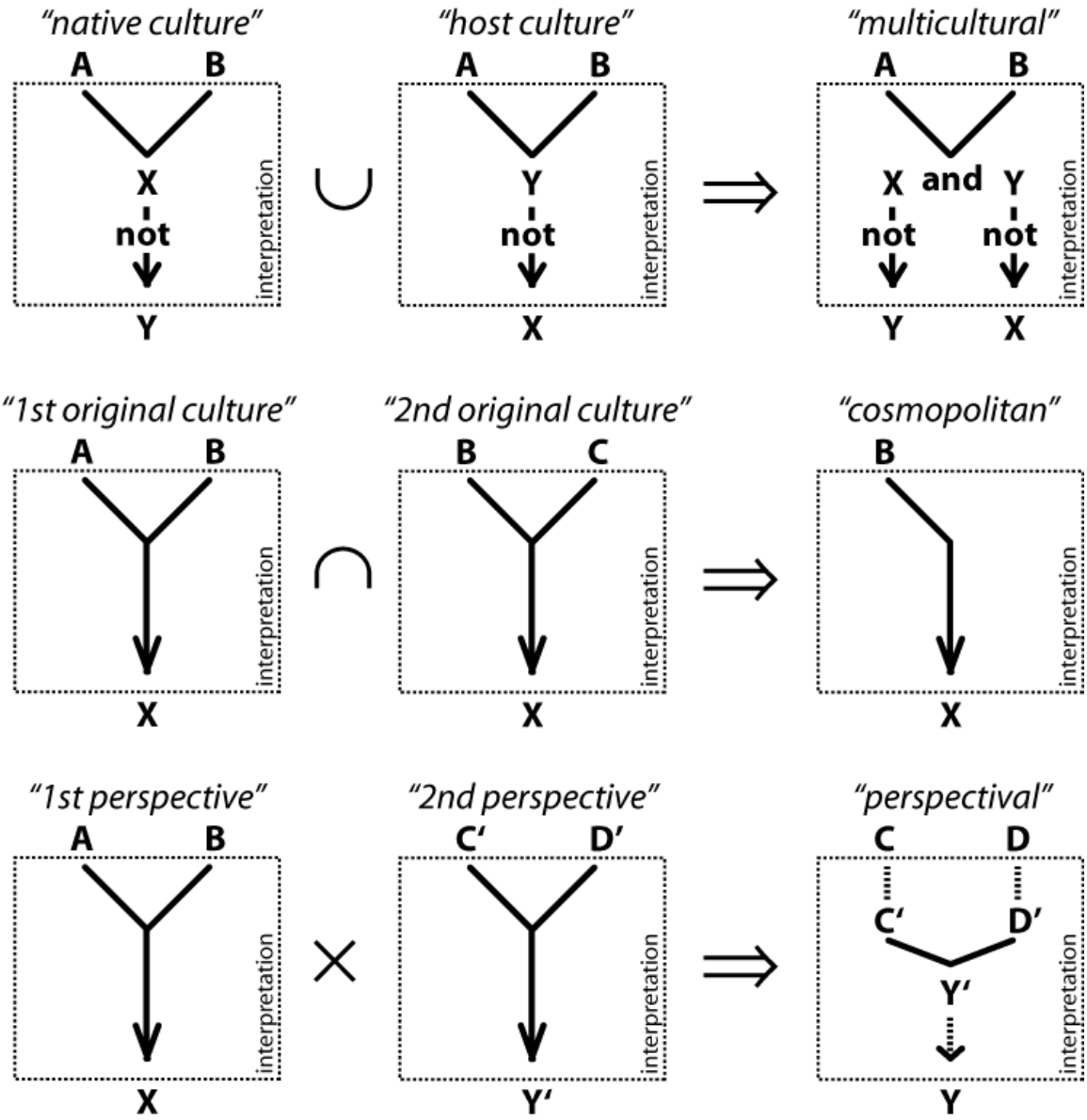

Fig. 2. Explaining the poetics of three critical experiences.

themselves switching between the modes of interpretation afforded by the native and host culture when they move from a family milieu to work milieu. During adaptation, however, it is inevitable that the two cultures will clash by producing contradictory interpretations. In these moments of clash, the individual is exposed to critical differences in the poetics of each culture.

Fig. 2 top row illustrates culture clash with a semiological diagram. Each box represents the interpretive mechanism afforded by a culture. Above each box are inputs to be interpreted (i.e. *signifiers*). Below each box are the deep meanings outputted by the interpretive mechanism (i.e. *signifieds*). So "native culture" interprets inputs A and B as together producing meaning X, and X also implies that

meaning Y cannot be true. However, "host culture" interprets inputs A and B as together producing meaning Y and not meaning X. The multiculturalist who reasons using the poetics of both cultures discovers that they contradict directly—one concluded X but not Y, the other concluded Y but not X. This experience may produce a range of effects—frustration, anxiety, low self-esteem, desensitisation, or disillusionment leading to the rejection of either the native or host culture as false. However, for an individual with high self-esteem and who holds both cultures in equal esteem, this clash will open his eyes to realizing that his *prima facie* objectivity actually depends on which culture he invokes, and that two cultures can imply contradictory conclusions without one being clearly wrong.

Whereas multicultural experience teaches how cultures can conflict, cosmopolitan experience teaches discernment between rich and shallow cultures. The cosmopolitanism of the world's urban metropolises is supposedly a rich stew of cultures, but the truth is that there is only a mirage of richness. Original cultures are corrupted when they enter cosmopolitan culture in the form of commodities and caricatures—they are oversimplified, and taken out of their original context. Harkening to Lacan's language metaphor for culture, cosmopolitanism is a pigeon language[2]. Fig. 2 middle row illustrates this. A "1st original culture" is nuanceful—both A and B support meaning X. Similarly, both B and C support meaning X in a "2nd original culture." However, instead of preserving these nuances, cosmopolitan culture keeps only the lowest common denominator from the original cultures, asserting that B alone can imply meaning X. The moment of criticism in the cosmopolitan experience is realizing that B alone is not a very convincing evidence for meaning X; thus illuminating the artificiality and actual shallowness of the cosmopolitan culture. Would this not breed contempt in any individual making this discovery? The individual would surely reject cosmopolitanism and begin to seek out cultures that are richer and more authentic.

Multicultural experience and cosmopolitan experience challenge the credibility of culture, but perspectival experience is a gateway to new optimism for culture. It breeds the desire to possess many cultural perspectives deeply, by demonstrating that one culture's perspective can be used to enhance and enrich another culture's perspective. Fig. 2 bottom row illustrates the utility of possessing multiple cultures. By possessing both a "1st perspective" and a parallel "2nd perspective," the perspectivist uses the mixture of these perspectives to create new understandings which would not have been possible otherwise. For example, signifiers C and D can produce the meaning Y by first recasting C and D into the C′ and D′

[2] When the speakers of two languages cohabitate, their languages eventually fuse, but what results is not rich, it is the lowest common denominator, and is without coherent justification.

of the "2nd perspective". But a question arises—does not multiculturalism already imply perspectival experience? There are similarities, but perspectivism is a more advanced experience—it presumes that an ascending superconsumer has already acquired a healthy scepticism of cultural authority; perspectival experience then teaches how culture can be affirmed as a tool for self-construction. In contrast, the initial stages of multicultural experience were frustrating and angst-ridden because the individual still focused on contradiction.

Perspectival experience is optimistic. Through it, even Bhabha's notion of the "beyond" can be bettered. "Beyond" is constituted by "moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha 1994, 1), but perspectival experience is constituted by moments of affirmation, not difference. Cultural perspectives enhance one another, and together, they produce a sense of conviviality—that all cultural perspectives are unified under one spirit. This has been a central insight of philosophers of the epistemological and postmodern such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, and Gilles Deleuze.

Conclusion

The meaning of postmodern experience is so vast, that it even holds contradiction. Jameson portrayed its darker side—the iconification and literalisation of signifiers produces such anxiety and feelings of meaninglessness that even flipping through television channels can be nauseating and bewildering. In contrast, there is a real optimism that, actually, there are genuine cultures out there which are full of meaning and waiting to be discovered. The secret of perspectivism is to focus on how cultural perspectives can enhance rather than contradict one another, and to focus on how culture can be useful rather than oppressive. I introduced the notion of a *superconsumer* as the hope that bridges the contradiction. It is not true that some people will always fear postmodern experiences, while other people have always been enlightened and embraced these experiences. These groups simply represent persons are different points in the journey of their understanding. In the superconsumer story, every enlightened superconsumer was also once a naive consumer, frustrated and anxious. The journey happens because the human spirit will not tolerate anxiety and meaninglessness for long—it will eventually overcome it. Multicultural experience, cosmopolitan experience, and perspectival experience empower this overcoming by provoking us to rethink culture from oppressor into tool. When culture is no longer feared, it can be appreciated for what it affords us—a rich tapestry to explore, the means to become who we are.

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