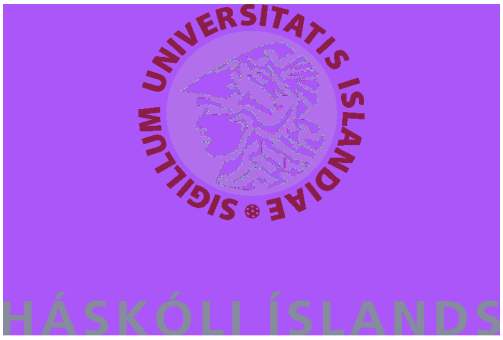

Hugvísindasvið

Reality at the Breaking Point

A Study of Nietzsche's, Lyotard's and Baudrillard's Postmodernist Theories in Neil Gaiman's American Gods

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Tryggvi Hrólfsson

September 2009

Háskóli Íslands

Deild erlendra tungumála,
bókmennta og málvísinda

Enska

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Summary

This essay attempts an exploration of postmodernism through the work of three significant writers associated with it and how their theories are mirrored within the novel *American Gods* by British novelist Neil Gaiman. The aim is not to define postmodernism, but rather to explore a significant theme within it, this theme being the notion of reality. Part I tries to trace the origins of both the term “postmodernism” and, more importantly, how the notion of reality became a subject for analysis within it through the work of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and his division of art into Apollonian and Dionysian perspectives. Part II continues by exploring the work of French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard and his “extremely simple” definition of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” In the third and final part, the work of another French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, and his ideas about the workings of the simulacra and the four phases of the image are explored. At all points the ideas and theories encountered are mirrored within Gaiman’s novel and thus made relatable from its point of view. The novel tells a story of a man’s journey through a chaotic unpredictable reality, and the gods’ struggle for survival within it. The conclusion is that the notion of reality is repeatedly tested, both within the works of the above-mentioned theorists as well as within the novel; all in all reality is found to be something much more chaotic and malleable than traditional perspectives have taken it to be.

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Introduction

Postmodernism defies all attempts at definition. It is like a vast unmapped territory, perilous to the unwary traveler. Studying it, you will find plenty of disagreement as to what the term actually refers to, paradoxes within its theories and a whole lot of barely understandable jargon about everything from philosophy to quantum mechanics. Postmodernism struggles against any definition of itself, and so this essay will not make any such futile attempts. Instead it will explore the territory, somewhat narrowed down to the perspective of literary theory. It will navigate through the bewildering terrain by traveling between three prominent landmarks within it. The first steps will endeavor to discover its origins, mainly through the work of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, our first landmark, whose influential works reach far beyond the territory of postmodernism. His legacy to postmodernism lies in his critique on the traditional means by which we place meaning and value to things and how we understand the world around us.

The second landmark to be visited is the work of French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard, who boldly goes where this essay dares not venture. Lyotard attempts an "extremely" simple definition of postmodernism, but as this essay will show, his definition turns out to be much more complex and revealing on further study. The final part of this exploration will be the work of another French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, who is perhaps even bolder in his writing than Lyotard, as he attacks the very foundations of all human knowledge and experience: our sense of reality.

Many of the ideas and concepts explored in this essay are so strange and alien that fiction is the ideal tool to study them. Thus a critical tool for this journey will be the novel *American Gods,* by British novelist Neil Gaiman, first published in 2001. The novel will act as a compass, map and walking stick all in one, guiding the reader at critical points and

helping him or her to grasp the matter at hand. It is therefore important to be familiar with this tool, and so a brief summary of the novel follows.

There are a number of subplots within Gaiman's novel, but the main plot is about a character named Shadow who at the beginning of the novel is serving a prison sentence for aggravated assault. He is released a few days early from prison due to the death of his wife in a car accident and is approached by a man who calls himself Wednesday. Wednesday, who as it later turns out is the Norse god Odin, wants to hire him as something like a bodyguard or assistant. He is gathering old and forgotten deities and culture heroes like himself to fight the new gods of the modern era. Shadow agrees and meets a number of supernatural beings in his work, and even accidentally raises his wife from the dead in the process. At the end of the novel it is revealed that Shadow is in fact Wednesday's son and therefore at least partly a god himself, probably Baldur, judging from a comment from Loki that he intends to sharpen a stick of mistletoe and ram it through Shadow's eye (mistletoe plays a key role in the death of Baldur in a well known tale in Norse mythology). Wednesday's entire campaign against the new gods turns out to be a scam. He is in partnership with Loki to bring about a battle between the gods which they intend to feed off. This is prevented by Shadow and his back-from-the-dead wife, Laura.

Thus armed with the novel, we can begin an exploration which will reveal that one of the fundamental aspects of postmodernism, the one that is mirrored within the novel, is the concept of reality itself. The perception of reality will be explored in Part I, how it structures our minds and beliefs in Part II, and finally how utterly fragile it really is in Part III. *American Gods* is a novel well suited for this exploration. Just as postmodernism, the novel defies attempts at being defined, as it blends together different literary genres and conventions. Intermingled within the story are independent short narratives, only loosely connected with the main storyline. The notion of reality is repeatedly tested and examined

under the stress of fiction. The novel does this not just by straining our beliefs within a fantasy setting, but more so by making the fantasy “real” and understandable to us on an intimate level. Through the course of events within the novel, Shadow’s view of the world is changed dramatically forever. His sense of reality is first destroyed by the relatively mundane fact that his wife cheated on him: something he finds much harder to believe than her rising up from the grave. Thus loose from the stable sense of reality he is able to not only survive but even triumph in a world of feuding gods and a fragile reality. Shadow’s bewildering journey in the novel is through the very same strange territory as the one this essay is about to explore.

Part I: Origins of Postmodernism

As with any substantial intellectual movement, it is impossible to say with any degree of accuracy when postmodernism emerged or exactly where its origins lie. One way to trace its origins would be to investigate where the term itself comes from. According to *The Postmodernism Reader*, edited by Dr. Michael Drolet who teaches History of Political Thought at Royal Holloway, University of London, one of the very first references to the word "postmodernism" dates from 1926, in a work titled *Postmodernism and Other Essays* by Catholic theologian Bernard Iddings Bell (Drolet 4). His use of the word in comparison to today's use of it is quite different due to its theological overtones, but all the same much of his preaching is similar to the modern use of the term. He used the word to signify a body of theological ideas which were a response to the modern faith in the power of reason. Contrary to the belief that reason could free people from ignorance and prejudice, Bell maintained that it left them spiritually impoverished, as this belief was grounded in the false premise that man was able to change the world around him. This modern premise was, according to Bell, nothing but arrogance towards God (Drolet 5), and Bell's postmodern man drew his faith "not from within his own ego but from Heaven" (qtd. in Drolet 5). While Bell's use of the word was very conservative and theological, it shares important values with later definitions of the term, especially in its skepticism in the power of reason (Drolet 5).

Postmodernism arguably goes back much further than Bell, and indeed does not grow out of the works or thought of any one man. In order to explore the subject better we need to seek a more fertile ground. Drolet continues to trace the origins of postmodernism through the work of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, who claimed that society was threatened by the advent of what he called "nihilism" or the "radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability" (*Will* 7). This was connected to a duality in western philosophy between what is real and what is apparent. Nietzsche approached this

duality, which is a common concept within philosophy, from an aesthetic perspective and maintained that it could be traced back to the art of ancient Greece (Drolet 15). On the one hand we have the Apollonian side of art, named after Apollo, the Greek god of (among other things) the sun, medicine, music and poetry. Apollonian art is that of form, beauty and appearance, and is best represented in sculpture, painting and the epic, for example. But it is an art of appearances instead of meaning, and only in its most intense form can it lead to the sensation that there is something else, something "real." This is the art of Dionysus, the god of (again among other things) wine, madness and ecstasy. This is an art of intoxication, ecstasy and terror. The Dionysian side of art appeals not simply to the senses as the Apollonian, but to an inner sense of reality. It does this through the experience of ecstasy, terror and even madness. Nietzsche claimed that a balance between these two sides of art allowed a person to be comforted through the realization "that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable" (*Tragedy* 59). This balance was lost with the influence of Plato, who sided wholly with the Apollonian side of art due to a loathing of the randomness and chaotic elements of Dionysian art. From that time on, the Apollonian side of art would dominate the Dionysian one, creating an illusion of "true" beauty and an understandable reality. Nietzsche claimed that this illusion empowered man, as the world was made so much less terrifying and more manageable, and allied with Christianity, it would dominate the western world for two millennia.

There is one scene in *American Gods* which shows vividly the workings of the Apollonian and Dionysian duality. It takes place at a roadside attraction called "the House on the Rock." It is referred to as a place of power, and Wednesday is using it as a meeting place for the gods. As Shadow is walking to the meeting place, Czernobog, an obscure Slavic god, grasps his arm and shows him a nineteenth-century penny-in-the-slot machine which depicts a strange clockwork story titled "The Drunkard's Dream."

> Shadow inserted his coin. The drunk in the graveyard raised his bottle to his lips. One of the gravestones flipped over, revealing a grasping corpse; a headstone turned around, flowers replaced by a grinning skull. A wraith appeared on the right of the church, while on the left of the church *something* with a half-glimpsed pointed, unsettlingly bird-like face, a pale, Boschian nightmare, glided smoothly from a headstone into the shadows and was gone. Then the church door opened, a priest came out, and the ghosts, haunts, and corpses vanished, and only the priest and the drunk were left alone in the graveyard. The priest looked down at the drunk disdainfully, and backed through the open door, which closed behind him, leaving the drunk on his own. (135)

The drunk, through his inebriated state, sees into the Dionysian world, which disappears with the appearance of the priest, who is part of the Apollonian view of the world. Ghosts and haunts have no place in an understandable reality but the strange contraption certainly forces the question of what is real and what is not upon its viewers:

> ‘You know why I show that to you?’ asked Czernobog.
>
> ‘No.’
>
> ‘That is the world as it is. That is the real world. It is there, in that box.’ (135)

What is “the real world?” Is the priest blind to a significant part of the world, or does his appearance dispel an illusion? The machinery behind the story is that of a clockwork, a perfectly ordered and logical contraption, yet the story that it depicts is anything but ordered and logical. Could that be what Czernobog means, that on some level the world is an understandable and ordered reality, but on another completely illogical and disordered?

It is important to realize that Nietzsche was not stating that the world was illogical and meaningless; rather he was criticizing the traditional means by which we place meaning and value to things and how we understand the world around us. He hoped that a balance between

the two sides of art could be found, but was disappointed with the art of his age. One might wonder, though, what he would have thought of the ascetics of the modernism movement, which flourished only two decades after his death. Modernism may have been exactly what Nietzsche was waiting for. It turned every established rule within every domain of art on its head. In literature, writers experimented with the very concept of reality by adopting various new forms and styles. Different genres were mixed together with an emphasis on fragmentation and randomness. But perhaps most important was the shift in emphasis away from *what* we see to *how* we see. This was a Dionysian shift of worldview, but the modernists did it with a heavy heart. Everywhere there is a tone of regret and nostalgia for an earlier time when things were clearer and the world more fixed. The change in this atmosphere is where modernism leaves off and postmodernism begins; later in the twentieth century, postmodernists reveled and played with art in a way that can easily be called Dionysian. In this sense postmodernism is both a continuation as well as a reaction against modernism, and the fact that this seems like a contradiction is entirely appropriate. This was not happening just within the arts. Science made its greatest steps forward and with new knowledge of the workings of the world came an entirely new perspective. This shift was not easy, and traditional views were never completely overthrown. Even such notable thinkers as Albert Einstein exclaimed in protest that "God does not play dice with the universe" (Natarajan 655). In *American Gods*, Mr. Ibis, the Egyptian god of wisdom (and other things of course), makes a good point on this subject:

> 'I feel very sorry for the professionals whenever they find another confusing skull, something that belonged to the wrong sort of people, or whenever they find statues or artifacts that confuse them – for they'll talk about the odd, but they won't talk about the impossible, which is where I feel sorry for them, for as soon as something becomes impossible it slipslides out of belief entirely, whether it's true or not.' (212)

Mr. Ibis comes straight to the point: it is not what really is or is not possible, but what we perceive as such. This is certainly not a trivial point; the entire world must be reconsidered and reevaluated over and over again, and this stance is not a popular one among those who still want to see the world as generally understandable and ordered. A notable reaction to this stance is an article published in 1980 titled "Modernity – An Incomplete Project" by German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. The incomplete project referred to in the title is that of the Enlightenment, which is the name given to a wide body of ideas developed in Western Europe from the late seventeenth century to the late eighteenth. These ideas centered on the power of human reason to free man from ancient dogmatic superstitions and improve society. Habermas claimed that this project was still very much ongoing and defined modernity by its principles. Thus anyone who opposed his belief in the power of reason and "modernity" was referred to as a "young conservative" (14). Understandably this did not sit well with said "conservatives" and a notable reaction to Habermas's writings is an essay titled "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" by French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard, which will be covered in more detail in Part Two of this essay.

Nietzsche's division of art into Apollonian and Dionysian is not THE story of postmodernism. Indeed it is arguably senseless to put a definitive article in front of those words to begin with. But it points to a line of thought going through the whole of human history. Postmodernism does not take reality and our understanding of it as a given premise, but seeks to explore the concept itself and how we relate to it. At one point in *American Gods*, after having escaped the authorities by somehow stepping outside of reality, Wednesday asks Shadow: 'Why don't you argue?' … 'Why don't you exclaim that it's all impossible? Why the hell do you just do what I say and take it all so fucking calmly?' (369). Shadow's answer is quite extraordinary:

> '[N]othing's really surprised me since Laura.'

> ‘Since she came back from the dead?’
>
> ‘Since I learned that she was screwing Robbie. That one hurt. Everything else just sits on the surface.’ (369)

That a wife cheats on her husband should not be that hard to believe, especially compared with the existence of mythological beings and supernatural powers, so this statement should not make any sense to anyone but a madman. But on an intimate level it makes perfect sense. Shadow’s entire world is shattered when he finds out about his wife’s affair with his best friend because it was something he considered utterly impossible, and the fact that this indeed can make sense shows clearly that there is something more than just “reasonable rationality” in the way we understand the world. Someone who ascribes to a rational Apollonian understanding of the world would probably interpret the novel in such a way that everything that happens after Shadow finds out about his wife are the ravings of a madman. A postmodernist look at it on the other hand, would not seek to rationalize it but rather explore the very concepts of rationality and reality, as well as how they are presented and understood. The next two parts of this essay will attempt this through the theoretic work of two major postmodernist thinkers: Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

Part II: Metanarratives vs. Language Games

Postmodernism is hard to define. If only because it is a big idea and big ideas tend to be hard to define except from a distance. In this light, Jean-François Lyotard's short and apparently simple definition of postmodernism put forth in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* seems all the more bold: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). Extreme simplifications tend to be of little use, but often turn out to be much more complicated with further study. A metanarrative is any abstract idea or definition that attempts a total explanation of the world, or at least some significant part of it. They are like anchors, stabilizing the fabric of reality for its believers. From this view postmodernism is a big idea about big ideas; it dares to question them, reevaluate them and judge them in different contexts. Incredulity towards them inevitably leads to a reevaluation of everything such a narrative involves, thus shaking loose the idea of an ordered reality. The assumption then is that the power of such narratives is in a decline in the modern era. Questions long thought answered, dead and buried are given new life and urgency. What is real? What is beautiful? What is just, and what are we all doing here? This is a prominent theme within Gaiman's *American Gods.* The novel may appear and even claim itself to be about America, but it quickly outgrows this somewhat simple notion. Ancient as well as more modern metanarratives are given a voice, to either defend or condemn themselves. More so, the entire concept of metanarratives is examined, questioned, judged and found to be wanting. The novel does this mainly through the use of irony, reflected not only through its characters but also in its structure and plot. This part of the essay will examine this theme as well as Lyotard's extreme definition of postmodernism.

Before going further into the novel, it would be prudent to examine further this notion of incredulity towards metanarratives. Criticisms laid against it is would be a great point to

start. Christopher Butler, professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University points out that there is no indication that metanarratives are in any sort of decline,

> [B]ecause allegiances to large-scale, totalizing religious and nationalist beliefs are currently responsible for so much repression, violence and war. … Indeed, the reason why academic postmodernists seemed so secure in their hostile analysis of the American and European societies around them in the 1970s may well have derived from the fact that these societies were not torn apart by contrary ideologies. (14)

It is certainly true that many metanarratives are very much alive and powerful to this day, but all that says is that postmodernism has an abundance of active subject matter for analysis. It is simply ridiculous to claim that metanarratives can not be in decline simply because they still exist. Nor does the fact that postmodernism originates from societies that are not torn apart by contrary ideologies in any way invalidate it. In fact Professor Butler may be said to be refuting his own argument by pointing out that postmodernism originates in societies that are in fact <u>not</u> torn apart by contrary ideologies. The point that seems to be missing is that although incredulity inevitably must lead to a reevaluation, it does not necessarily need to lead to the rejection or abandonment of ideas.

Another criticism laid against Lyotard's definition of postmodernism comes from, among others, the aforementioned German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Habermas points out that there seems to be an internal inconsistency in Lyotard's definition of postmodernism because it can be seen as a metanarrative itself. Habermas claims that incredulity towards metanarratives can only make sense if we "preserve at least one standard for [the] explanation of the corruption of all reasonable standards" ("Entwinement" 28). It therefore refutes itself because if one doubts universal narratives (i.e. standards) such as "knowledge" and "truth" it is impossible to believe the "truth" of postmodernism. This argument is perfectly logical, but incomplete. Again the point that seems to be missing is that

incredulity does not necessarily need to lead to the rejection or abandonment of ideas. If postmodernism is a metanarrative, its own precepts must also apply to itself, i.e. it must direct incredulity towards itself. Extreme postmodernism will inevitably lead to a crisis of legitimacy. This can be referred to as a complete loss of the "real." If we take literature as an example, how can we define a novel? From an extreme postmodernist viewpoint the phonebook has as much claim as Gaiman's *American Gods* to be defined as a novel, or simply as a work of art. The solution Lyotard proposes in *The Postmodern Condition* comes through the work of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. He developed the concept of Language games which are simple examples of the use of language. Examples of this are how we talk with children, or simple commands, which do not need grammatical information to be understood. But more than that, the use of language can be broken down into different modes or functions that "can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put – in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces" (Lyotard 10). There are three points about language games which are important from our topic's perspective. The first is that the rules of the games do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the objects of a contract between players. The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, and the third one is, as already suggested, that every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game (Lyotard 10). This can all be seen as a metaphor, a model for how to replace metanarratives with something else and still retain a sense of reality. We can break down metanarratives in the same way we break down language, although Lyotard's discussion is more about the contexts of legitimation and the authority playing language games places its players into. In this context, *American Gods* is a novel because of how it is used by its reader; or rather what kind of a language game he or she plays with the book. It is a novel not because of any clear definition of what a novel is but because it is read in a certain context and the

phone book is not, because it is used for other purposes. Of course this implies that if a person is able to read the phonebook as a novel than that is what it automatically becomes. There is an endless amount of possible language games people can "play" with because the rules are susceptible to the context of the "game." So then if we read and understand a novel like *American Gods* as a language game we can of course apply an endless amount of different interpretations as long as we can explain the context within which we interpret it. If we cannot do that we are playing different language games.

The context within which I am interpreting *American Gods* is that the notion of incredulity towards metanarratives is a prominent theme throughout the story and can be seen in the characters themselves as well as in both the plot and overall structure of the novel. Gaiman criticizes the notion of metanarratives mostly through the use of irony. Beginning with the structure, the novel is riddled with a number of short stories that can easily be read independently of the main storyline. Gaiman is unafraid of defying age old literary conventions (metanarratives) by mixing together the genres of the novel and the short story, and the result is a much more intricate and deeper story. Most of these stories are about people migrating to the new world, bringing their gods or rather "ideas" with them. The short stories may also be said to serve another important role in the book; they direct the reader's attention away from the main storyline at critical points, working like diversions to keep the reader from discovering the main plot twist of the story too soon. The novel is about personified deities and culture heroes, who can be said to be walking, talking metanarratives, desperately trying to survive in the modern United States of America. Their own declining status is a metaphor for the decreasing power of metanarratives in today's industrialized society. The first short story in the book reveals this very well. Bilquis the queen of Sheba who is described in the book as the one who was "worshiped as a living goddess by the wisest of kings" (400) is reduced to prostituting herself for worship, and in the act she swallows the

poor fellow up. Odin the all-father, creator of the world in Norse mythology, uses his powers to seduce women into sleeping with him for the same reason, and the Egyptian gods of the afterlife, Anubis and Ibis, manage a small funeral parlor. The list could go on but suffice it to say that the state of the gods is considerably reduced from their previous place of power and significance. Throughout the story it is implied that some sort of a great event is about to happen. This event is sometimes referred to as an approaching storm or a "paradigm shift," and its reference would imply that there is some sort of order to things that even the gods (i.e. metanarratives) must obey, some sort of a meta metanarrative even. The irony is apparent when it all turns out to be a scam, orchestrated by Wednesday and Loki.

Perhaps the best example in the book of an ironic representation of metanarratives is a checkers game between Shadow and Czernobog, a supposedly malevolent Slavic deity. The stakes in the game are that if Shadow wins, Czernobog will enlist in Wednesday's battle against the new gods, but if Czernobog wins, he gets to knock out Shadow's brains with his hammer. Czernobog wins the game but is persuaded to play another one. This time Shadow changes his tactics and wins the game. The irony becomes apparent in light of what the players themselves represent. Czernobog literally means "dark god" and demands to play black, while Shadow, as is revealed later in the book, represents the Norse god Baldur, who in contrast with Czernobog is a very benevolent deity. Their checkers game is an ironic representation of nothing less than the battle between good and evil, a very prominent metanarrative in human culture, and takes place in a rather rundown apartment building between what appears to be an unemployed Eastern European immigrant and an ex-convict. What is most revealing about the game is Shadow's attitude towards it and how he manages to win the second game.

> Shadow had played checkers in prison: it passed the time. He had played chess, too, but he was not temperamentally suited to chess. He did not like planning ahead. He

> preferred picking the perfect move for the moment. You could win in checkers like that, sometimes. (90)

Czernobog is organized and plays a very tactical game, which allows him to win the first round. In the second game Shadow realizes that Czernobog is going to play in exactly the same way, so he decides to play recklessly. “He snatched tiny opportunities, moved without thinking, without a pause to consider. And this time, as he played, Shadow smiled; and whenever Czernobog moved a piece, Shadow smiled wider” (92-93). Shadow breaks down his game in the same way that a language game breaks down a metanarrative. Instead of organizing his game, he plays each move only in context with itself and picks the perfect move for the moment. He is “playing” language games instead of “planning” metanarratives. Czernobog on the other hand, does not change his tactics and therefore loses the game: a telling example of the power of language games over metanarratives, at least as regards checkers games.

Postmodernism can be said to be many things but simple is not one of them. Lyotard’s “extreme” simplification may seem simple on paper, but proves to be enormously complicated in practice. By pulling the legs from under established metanarratives, postmodernism inevitably leads to crisis of legitimation. Lyotard’s solution is to play language games which base legitimation on the relevant context. In *American Gods,* incredulity towards metanarratives is an active influence in every part of the novel. This can be found in the story’s structure and plot as well as in the characters themselves. Metanarratives are presented in an ironic way to speak for themselves and may be said to condemn themselves in the process. But the most subtle irony of the story is perhaps to treat themes like “incredulity” and the loss of the “real” in a fantasy setting. A quote by the English writer G.K Chesterton and a favorite one of Gaiman’s, explains this perhaps best and fits well with the topic of this essay: “Fairy tales, are more than true. Not because they tell us that

dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten" (Wagner, Golden, and Bissette 353).

Part III: The Power of the Simulacra

If Lyotard can be said to have weakened the anchors to the fabric of reality with his definition, his fellow countryman and theorist Jean Baudrillard went for the killing blow with his work, regarding the aspects of simulation. Baudrillard is a prominent landmark within postmodernism, and arguably one of its more controversial figures. Much of his work is in the form of an analysis of modern consumer culture, based on a combination of semiotics, structural linguistics and Marxism. In his book, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), he describes the age of postmodernity as "the immense process of the destruction of meaning" (161). Baudrillard maintained that reality itself had been replaced in the present age by what he referred to as a hyperreality. This happened in a succession of phases in which an image, any image, goes through radical changes explained by Baudrillard thus:

> Such would be the successive phases of the image:
>
> It is the reflection of a profound reality;
>
> It masks and denatures a profound reality;
>
> It masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
>
> It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

The third and fourth phases are those of the simulacrum. A simulacrum is generally defined as an image or representation of someone or something ("Simulacrum"), but Baudrillard uses the term in a more specialized way. Baudrillard's simulacrum is an image of another image, a simulation of possibly an endless amount of other simulations until it ceases to have any relation to reality. Thus our concept of reality changes from something that exists independently of ourselves into something that is entirely man-made, manufactured for example in propaganda, edited news footage and so called "reality" TV-shows. Baudrillard used Disneyland as an example, claiming that it "exists in order to hide that it is the 'real'

country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland … Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" (12). Thus Disneyland is a simulacrum both because it masks the absence of a profound reality and because it has no relation to any reality except its own.

Baudrillard has been widely criticized, and even in objective writings about him the word "idiosyncratic" seems to come up suspiciously often. British literary critic Christopher Norris accuses Baudrillard of moving "straight on from a descriptive account of certain prevalent conditions in the late twentieth-century lifeworld to a wholesale anti-realist stance which takes those conditions as a pretext for dismantling every last claim to validity or truth" (qtd. in Drolet 31). This criticism certainly has some validity, and furthermore Baudrillard's extreme pessimism and deterministic interpretations seem to belong much more with Marxist theory than with postmodernism. And yet his work is so intriguing and shocking that it is impossible to ignore him completely, rather one must approach such an "idiosyncratic" way of thought from an idiosyncratic point of view of one's own. In order to illustrate Baudrillard's stages, I have chosen to write a purely fictional story, which could as well have preceded *American Gods*, as the world that the gods of America find themselves in, is the very same one as reached by the end of my story about the image of Gaia i.e. the world of hyperreality.

Once upon a pre-historic time there was an exceptionally clever caveman called Atouk. This Atouk was in fact the greatest genius of his day, and he made a great discovery one day as he was walking out of his cave where he stubbed his toe and fell down. This resulted in one of those great discoveries which change the way we look at the world. Just as an apple made Newton discover the laws of gravity, so did this toe-stubbing lead to a phenomenal discovery. As Atouk fell down on his face, he discovered the existence of the ground which hit him. This discovery may seem trivial and obvious today, but indeed

someone must have made it first and even more importantly, give this fundamental aspect of our universe a name. He decided to call the ground “Gaia.” Atouk proceeded to further investigate this strange phenomenon. He discovered that stuff grew out of it that he could eat, that a part of it was always beneath him, whether he climbed up a cliff or dug a hole, and furthermore he discovered that it could change its properties in various ways. Sometimes it was wet and soft, other times it was dry and hard. Ecstatic over his great discovery, Atouk ran to others of the tribe to tell them about it, which turned out to be quite easy. Others had come to much the same conclusions and understood immediately what he was communicating about by grunting, posturing and throwing dirt around at people. But what made Atouk’s discovery so significant is that he gave it a name. Soon enough everyone knew this name and what it signified. The word “Gaia” was now a symbol of Baudrillard’s first phase: a reflection of a profound reality. But Atouk’s genius did not stop there. In his continued research he made other startling discoveries. One day as he was studying Gaia by looking at the horizon, he discovered that there was something that seemed to be on top of Gaia, all around him and above, this strange phenomenon seemed to fill up the rest of the world. Again he gave a fundamental aspect of the universe a name, “Uranus.” Once again he studied and investigated this other significant aspect of the universe and its relationship with the rest of it, and this time it lead to a truly miraculous discovery. Atouk had already noticed that when Gaia was dry there was less for him and his tribe to eat, but when Gaia got wet the beasts that they could hunt would return, and berries and nuts started growing as well. Now he could see that the rain came from Uranus and that there was clearly some relationship between Uranus and Gaia. Thinking further upon this, he saw clearly that this relationship was very similar to that between him and his mate, Tala. He ran back again to his tribe to tell them of this great discovery that Gaia had a lover. This turned out to be much harder for him to explain, but after many grunts, yells and rocks being thrown around, Atouk convinced his audience. This

was a significant event as now both Gaia and Uranus had been anthropomorphized. After much deliberation the tribe "discovered" that Gaia was their mother, who fed them and nurtured while Uranus was their father, the mate of Gaia who looked over the tribe. The word "Gaia" has now changed dramatically, as it is now a symbol of the second phase. Now that it has been given human attributes, it masks and denatures a profound reality, because as it turns out the ground is in actual fact not anybody's mother, and the relationship between it and the sky is not the same as that between human lovers. Or is it?

Atouk's discoveries have already led the word "Gaia" through the first two phases, and now the stage is set for the next two, the phases of the simulacra. If Gaia is a mother and a lover, then perhaps she can be appeased and even manipulated. This is Atouk's greatest discovery, the birth of a goddess through the very first act of ritual. What this ritual exactly is does not matter; it can be anything because it *masks the absence of a profound reality*. Instead it creates its own reality, the reality of the ritual which is sustained by the power of the ritual. Atouk picks up a piece of Gaia and makes a statue of it in the likeness of a pregnant woman. The tribe worships the statue and pleads with Uranus to impregnate her, and in reward it rains now and then. Reality is interpreted through the new meaning of the word "Gaia" instead of the other way around. A significant part of reality as perceived by the tribe is no longer "real": it is hyperreal.

This is the reality which the gods of the novel belong to, except perhaps that the forgotten old gods, who still survive, have taken another significant step. Since their image is no longer being sustained by the rituals of their worshipers, they perform them themselves, tricking people into their worship. This is shown clearly in Wednesday's words, "What the hell *else* can I do? They don't sacrifice rams or bulls to me. They don't send me the souls of killers and slaves, gallows-hung and raven-picked. *They* made me. *They* forgot me. Now I take a little back from them. Isn't that fair?" (336). The continued existence and power of the

gods always comes from some kind of a ritual. This is clearest in the case of Hinzelman, a god who has gone so far as to make a small town his own, tricking the inhabitants into sacrificing one of their children every year and giving them in return prosperity. The trickery is in the form of a raffle ticket lottery, where people make bets on when a car placed on an iced lake will fall through the ice and into the water. Unknown by them, the body of a missing child has been placed in the trunk of the car, to go down with it eventually into the water. Every year, Hinzelman feeds off the power of this ritual, as everyone focuses his or her attention on the unknown sacrifice right in front of their eyes.

Another good example is the Celtic fertility goddess Easter, who gives her name to the Christian holiday, a fact which escapes most Christian people today. The name as well as many of the traditions connected with this holiday originate in the worship of this ancient goddess, such as the hiding of eggs and giving of flowers, but as Wednesday makes clear to her in order to enlist her to his cause, nobody is worshiping her any more. All that is left is a forgotten name and meaningless tradition. As with Hinzelman's raffle, it is really just a scam for worship.

But what about the new gods of the modern era who are warring with the older ones? Surely there is no ritual worship that sustains such images as technology and the media. In the world of the novel there clearly is, as a conversation between Shadow and his TV shows:

> 'I'm the idiot box. I'm the TV. I'm the all-seeing eye and the world of the cathode ray. I'm the boob tube. I'm the little shrine the family gathers to adore.'
>
> 'You're the television? Or someone in the television?'
>
> 'The TV's the altar. I'm what people are sacrificing to.'
>
> 'What do they sacrifice?' asked Shadow.
>
> 'Their time, mostly,' said Lucy. 'Sometimes each other.' (189)

What the old gods and the modern gods all have in common is that they are all simulacra: images and symbols that have no basis in what Baudrillard referred to as a "profound" reality, but in an imaginary man-made hyperreality. They feed off their own symbols, simulated over and over again in ritual symbolism. Baudrillard himself asked the intriguing question:

> But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination …? (4)

The question posed by Baudrillard and Gaiman's novel is fascinating. What is reality when everything is subject to simulation, and thus imaginary, at least to some extent? What is it but a sea of images, all vying for attention and transforming themselves as needed? And what is there to do about this, except to either despair or write a sarcastic novel about it?

It is the extent to which the world of man has reached the fourth phase of the image that critics like Norris find so hard to accept in Baudrillard's work. In such essays as "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" Baudrillard goes very far in stating that "the war, the victory and the defeat are all equally unreal, equally nonexistent"(Coulter). It is one thing to point out how fragile the relationship is between images and reality, and something completely else to claim that a significant event, such as the Gulf War, did not take place simply because it was propagandized and made in a certain way into an image. Of that there is simply no evidence for, and the simple fact that Baudrillard managed to speculate on the disappearance of reality should prove that it still exists in some form, since if it had been completely replaced by something else, it would be indistinguishable from anyone's sense of reality. The importance of Baudrillard's work lies in showing that this concept "reality" is not as clear and simple as we thought. It is malleable, fragile and susceptible to change, as even gods get old, are forgotten and replaced by new ones.

Conclusion

The exploration of the territory of postmodernism nears its end, and it is necessary to take stock of where the journey has taken us. It was never the intent to define postmodernism, but it is now possible to assert that any such definition must take into account the challenge postmodernism lays against the concept of reality.

Part I attempted to trace the origins of postmodernism, mainly through the work of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, who laid the ground by challenging the traditional way the world is seen. His division of the world of art into Apollonian and Dionysian, points to a line of thought going through the whole of human history, which is that it is not just *what* we see that is important but also *how* we see. This is no trivial point as it can challenge the notion that reality is ordered and stable. The main character of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, Shadow, is also faced with this challenge. His sense of reality is devastated when he learns about his wife's affair with his friend, and this is perhaps the only reason he can interact with the supernatural characters of the novel. Shadow's world may be fictional, but it is perfectly understandable. The gods may be supernatural beings, but there is nothing really mysterious about their behavior and struggle for survival. The fact that the "unreal" fictional world of Shadow can make sense strongly implies that there is something more than just reasonable rationality in how we understand the world around us. Not because we believe his tale, but because it is so relatable. The world does not always make perfect sense; it bewilders and surprises at every turn. Shadow may be mad, but then so are we, and therefore well suited for an exploration of postmodernism.

If Nietzsche laid the ground for postmodernism's challenge to reality, French theorist Jean-François Lyotard picks it up by challenging the authority of metanarratives with his "extremely" simple definition of postmodernism. Incredulity towards metanarratives inevitably leads to a reevaluation of everything such a narrative involves, and taken to

extremes can lead to a complete loss of the real. An apparent weakness of this idea is that it is clearly a metanarrative itself, and must therefore apply its own precepts to itself, i.e. it must direct incredulity towards itself. Lyotard's solution is to break down the metanarratives by playing language games with them. Incredulity towards metanarratives is a prominent theme within Gaiman's novel. This can be found within the story's structure and plot, as well as in the characters themselves. The entire concept of metanarratives is examined, questioned, judged and found to be wanting as they are personified in the form of the gods, and therefore given a voice to either defend or condemn themselves. Gaiman criticizes the power of metanarratives mainly through the use of irony. The state of the old gods is much diminished in the present age, and they struggle to survive by tricking people into worshiping them. More so, the irony is apparent when the main storyline is revealed to be based entirely on a scam.

The most direct challenge of postmodernism to the concept of reality is the work of Jean Baudrillard. His ideas of the workings of simulacra and hyperreality reveal how fragile our sense of reality really is, as it is in a significant way man-made. Gaiman's novel mirrors this in a very clear way. The gods are images that have reached the stage of the simulacrum. They are self-sustaining images, disconnected to what Baudrillard refers to as a "profound" reality. And that is finally the ultimate question. What is this "profound" reality? What is left of it if our sense of reality is no longer stable and absolute, but susceptible to change at a moment's notice? Postmodernism has no answer to that, it simply does the asking. That is perhaps the closest this exploration can get to a definition of postmodernism, and in the age of information with its abundance of all sorts of answers, good questions are more precious than ever.

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