

Geraldo, Eat Your Avant-Pop Heart Out

By Mark Leyner

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JENNY JONES: Boy, we have a show for you today!

Recently, the University of Virginia philosopher Richard Rorty made the stunning declaration that nobody has "the foggiest idea" what postmodernism means. "It would be nice to get rid of it," he said. "It isn't exactly an idea; it's a word that pretends to stand for an idea."

This shocking admission that there is no such thing as postmodernism has produced a firestorm of protest around the country. Thousands of authors, critics and graduate students who'd considered themselves postmodernists are outraged at the betrayal.

Today we have with us a writer -- a recovering postmodernist -- who believes that his literary career and personal life have been irreparably damaged by the theory, and who feels defrauded by the academics who promulgated it. He wishes to remain anonymous, so we'll call him "Alex."

Alex, as an adolescent, before you began experimenting with postmodernism, you considered yourself -- what?

Close shot of **ALEX**.

An electronic blob obscures his face. Words appear at bottom of screen: "Says he was traumatized by postmodernism and blames academics."

ALEX (his voice electronically altered): A high modernist. Y'know, Pound, Eliot, Georges Braque, Wallace Stevens, Arnold Schonberg, Mies van der Rohe. I had all of Schonberg's 78's.

JENNY JONES: And then you started reading people like Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard -- how did that change your feelings about your modernist heroes?

ALEX: I suddenly felt that they were, like, stifling and canonical.

JENNY JONES: Stifling and canonical? That is so sad, such a waste. How old were you when you first read Fredric Jameson?

ALEX: Nine, I think.

The **AUDIENCE** gasps.

JENNY JONES: We have some pictures of young Alex. . . .

We see snapshots of 14-year-old **ALEX** reading Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia." The **AUDIENCE** oohs and ahs.

ALEX: We used to go to a friend's house after school -- y'know, his parents were never home -- and we'd read, like, Paul Virilio and Julia Kristeva.

JENNY JONES: So you're only 14, and you're already skeptical toward the "grand narratives" of modernity, you're questioning any belief system that claims universality or transcendence. Why?

ALEX: I guess -- to be cool.

JENNY JONES: So, peer pressure?

ALEX: I guess.

JENNY JONES: And do you remember how you felt the very first time you entertained the notion that you and your universe are constituted by language -- that reality is a cultural construct, a "text" whose meaning is determined by infinite associations with other "texts"?

ALEX: Uh, it felt, like, good. I wanted to do it again.

The **AUDIENCE** groans.

JENNY JONES: You were arrested at about this time?

ALEX: For spray-painting "The Hermeneutics of Indeterminacy" on an overpass.

JENNY JONES: You're the child of a mixed marriage -- is that right?

ALEX: My father was a de Stijl Wittgensteinian and my mom was a neo-pre-Raphaelite.

JENNY JONES: Do you think that growing up in a mixed marriage made you more vulnerable to the siren song of postmodernism?

ALEX: Absolutely. It's hard when you're a little kid not to be able to just come right out and say (sniffles), y'know, I'm an Imagist or I'm a phenomenologist or I'm a post-painterly abstractionist. It's really hard -- especially around the holidays. (He cries.)

JENNY JONES: I hear you. Was your wife a postmodernist?

ALEX: Yes. She was raised avant-pop, which is a fundamentalist offshoot of postmodernism.

JENNY JONES: How did she react to Rorty's admission that postmodernism was essentially a hoax?

ALEX: She was devastated. I mean, she's got all the John Zorn albums and the entire Semiotext(e) series. She was crushed.

We see **ALEX'S WIFE** in the audience, weeping softly, her hands covering her face.

JENNY JONES: And you were raising your daughter as a postmodernist?

ALEX: Of course. That's what makes this particularly tragic. I mean, how do you explain to a 5-year-old that self-consciously recycling cultural detritus is suddenly no longer a valid art form when, for her entire life, she's been taught that it is?

JENNY JONES: Tell us how you think postmodernism affected your career as a novelist.

ALEX: I disavowed writing that contained real ideas or any real passion. My work became disjunctive, facetious and nihilistic. It was all blank parody, irony enveloped in more irony.

It merely recapitulated the pernicious banality of television and advertising. I found myself indiscriminately incorporating any and all kinds of pop kitsch and shlock. (He begins to weep again.)

JENNY JONES: And this spilled over into your personal life?

ALEX: It was impossible for me to experience life with any emotional intensity. I couldn't control the irony anymore. I perceived my own feelings as if they were in quotes. I italicized everything and everyone. It became impossible for me to appraise the quality of anything. To me everything was equivalent -- the Brandenburg Concertos and the Lysol jingle had the same value. . . . (He breaks down, sobbing.)

JENNY JONES: Now, you're involved in a lawsuit, aren't you?

ALEX: Yes. I'm suing the Modern Language Association.

JENNY JONES: How confident are you about winning?

ALEX: We need to prove that, while they were actively propounding it, academics knew all along that postmodernism was a specious theory. If we can unearth some intradepartmental memos -- y'know, a paper trail -- any corroboration that they knew postmodernism was worthless cant at the same time they were teaching it, then I think we have an excellent shot at establishing liability.

JENNY JONES wades into audience and proffers microphone to a woman.

WOMAN (with lateral head-bobbing): It's ironic that Barry Scheck is representing the M.L.A. in this litigation because Scheck is the postmodern attorney par excellence. This is the guy who's made a career of volatilizing truth in the simulacrum of exculpation!

VOICE FROM AUDIENCE: You go, girl!

WOMAN: Scheck is the guy who came up with the quintessentially postmodern re-bleed defense for O. J., which claims that O. J. merely vigorously shook Ron and Nicole, thereby re-aggravating pre-existing knife wounds. I'd just like to say to any client of Barry Scheck -- lose that zero and get a hero!

The **AUDIENCE** cheers wildly.

WOMAN: Uh, I forgot my question.

Dissolve to message on screen: If you believe that mathematician Andrew Wiles' proof of Fermat's last theorem has caused you or a member of your family to dress too provocatively, call (800) 555-9455.

Dissolve back to studio. In the audience, **JENNY JONES** extends the microphone to a man in his mid-30's with a scruffy beard and a bandana around his head.

MAN WITH BANDANA: I'd like to say that this "Alex" is the single worst example of pointless irony in American literature, and this whole heartfelt renunciation of postmodernism is a ploy – it's just more irony.

The **AUDIENCE** whistles and hoots.

ALEX: You think this is a ploy?! (He tears futilely at the electronic blob.) This is my face!

The **AUDIENCE** recoils in horror.

ALEX: This is what can happen to people who naively embrace postmodernism, to people who believe that the individual -- the autonomous, individualist subject -- is dead. They become a palimpsest of media pastiche -- a mask of metastatic irony.

JENNY JONES (biting lip and shaking her head): That is so sad. Alex -- final words?

ALEX: I'd just like to say that self-consciousness and irony seem like fun at first, but they can destroy your life. I know. You gotta be earnest, be real. Real feelings are important. Objective reality does exist.

AUDIENCE members whoop, stomp and pump fists in the air.

JENNY JONES: I'd like to thank Alex for having the courage to come on today and share his experience with us.

Join us for tomorrow's show, "The End of Manichean, Bipolar Geopolitics Turned My Boyfriend Into an Insatiable Sex Freak (and I Love It!)."