

Film as a Looking Glass: Reading Postmodern Society as Represented in the Media

Masahiko Fukagawa

I. Introduction

In the United States, the culture as a 'framework' which opts for consumption is dominated by images sent through the media, and has affected all aspects of everyday life. Media, especially movies, represent American popular culture and consumer society well. Movies and TV came to provide the public with amusement. The media has played an important role in the formation of popular culture. It is important to understand how American popular culture influences and shapes peoples' way of life. In this paper, I would like to discuss the extent to which American popular culture is affected by postmodernism.

II. What is American popular culture?

A. What is a popular culture?

In order to discuss American popular culture I first need to define the concept of popular culture in general. John Storey states that there are six definitions of popular culture: a culture which is widely favored by many people; a culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture; a 'mass culture'; a culture that originates from 'the people'; a culture which draws on the political analysis of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, particularly on his development of the concept of hegemony and a culture which is informed by recent thinking

around the debate on postmodernism. (Storey, 2001, pp.5-12) After defining popular culture, Storey goes on to say: '[What] all these definitions have in common is the insistence that whatever else popular culture might be, it is definitely a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization.' (Storey, 2001, p.13) Storey's third definition, popular culture as a 'mass culture', was developed at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. For the Frankfurt school popular culture is a mass culture, produced by a 'culture industry' and designed for mass consumption.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that popular culture is composed of standardized and uniform commercial commodities. They believe that mass culture is a product of technological development. (Giles and Middleton, 1999, p.223) There is another school of 'cultural studies' emanating from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, England, which includes the work of Gramsci. According to Gramsci, in order to maintain its hegemony the dominant class must continually negotiate with the subordinate classes. (Tuner, 1996, p.61) Gramsci used the concept of hegemony as a way of explaining how the dominant class managed to impose its ideology on subordinate classes without force. As part of this process, the cultural industry — a tool of the dominant class — produces cultural commodities for consumption by the subordinate classes.

The subordinate classes do not simply accept these cultural commodities. Subordinated classes make their own popular culture from cultural resources in a process that necessarily involves the phenomena of 'resistance'. John Fiske states in relation to the term 'resistance' that

popular culture is made by various formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources. (Fiske, 2001, p.1) Fiske claims that popular culture is made from below. Popular culture is something through which the subordinate groups produce the 'social meaning' against the dominant ideology. Fiske also argues that the capitalist system tries to dominate the market and the consumer, but the public, though clearly subordinate to the commercial interests, do have an active role to play in the actual creation of popular culture. Fiske presents a view of popular culture that subordinated groups do not construct their subjects within the dominant ideology but produce different meanings in popular culture as strategies of resistance.

B. The emergence of modern consumer society and popular culture

Looking back upon the formation of mass consumption offers the key to an understanding of popular culture as 'mass culture'. The United States in the 20th century established mass production based on a cheap labor force, abundant resources and immigration. This form of mass production and consumption was called 'Fordism'. Anthony Giddens explains 'Fordism' as 'the name used to designate the system of mass production tied to the cultivation of mass markets'. (Giddens, 2001, p.383). According to David Lyon:

'Starting with Ford, it is noted that the five-dollar, eight-hour day at his assembly lines was intended both to ensure worker compliance with the regime of industrial production and to line the workers' pockets with enough to take advantage of the consumer products being churned out.' (Lyon, 1999, p.56)

'Fordism' is an idea that the profit of a company was not only made by 'exploiting' laborers

as Marx thought, but rather by making laborers consumers simultaneously. The company made laborers' wages higher in order to make them buy its products more. The laborers, with purchasing power thus obtained, changed into the 'middle class', and then turned into 'consumers'.

It can be said that modernity formed 'mass society' through consumption. The value supporting mass society is that of 'equality'. This 'equality' is materialized by the same standard of living applying to the majority in a society. People consume in order to maintain their standard of living. The mass society where the quality of life is equivalent appeared in the United States with the advent of mass production. In this kind of society, being 'equal' means that people buy the same thing, use the same thing, live the same life and share the same knowledge and information. Immigration united the original cultures of immigrants with the American one. This is symbolized by the form of 'the American way of life'. The idea of a 'consumer' became a living standard of American society. Thus, the feature of American popular culture is a mass consumer society lining up side-by-side in affluence.

C. Metamorphosis of consumer society: from modern to postmodern

American popular culture is a product of the culture industry in American consumer society based on commercialism. People's way of life is now rooted in the process of consumption. The era of mass production with its emphasis on similarity, which will be examined in the next chapter, has been replaced by a new society which is characterized by consuming in order to self-expression. Most Americans' very identities are structured by the act of consuming.

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan characterized the post-war media society as an 'electronic global village'. New information technology played an important role in the shift from a productive to a reproductive social order of consumer society. Through the technological revolution of the 1980's such as home video and cable TV, the media was able to distribute information promptly. The technological revolution spread popular culture amongst the public quickly, especially through the development of mass media. The mass media is an existence which mediates the producer and the consumers. The media has flooded and permeated public life with 'cultural commodities' in large quantities. An aspect of American ways of life is reflected in popular culture.

In turn, American mass consumer culture expanded by technological development in the first half of the 20th century. Advertising has supported this consumption culture. The growth of consumer society is accelerated by the development of the media. According to Judith Williamson:

'Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today. They are ubiquitous, an inevitable part of everyone's lives... Pervading all the media, but limited to none, advertising forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and an immense influence.' (Williamson, 1978, p.11)

The image of the goods advertised through media changes into a life style. The purpose of advertisers is to stimulate the consumer's desire using certain images which appear in the

advertisement rather than to inform people of the product itself.

III. What are the modern features of American popular culture?

With a consumer society as background I turn now to an account of American popular culture. Media plays an important role in the formation of popular culture. Movies and TV are good example to illustrate popular culture. According to James Monaco, 'In America between 1920 and 1950, for example, the movies provided the main cultural format for the discovery and description of our national identity. (Television quickly replaced movies after 1950.)' (Monaco, 1977, p.262) It can be said that a movie and TV are a mirror which reflects the culture of the country in which it is produced. Camille Paglia states that Hollywood, America's greatest modern contribution to world culture, is a business, a religion, an art form, and a state of mind. (Paglia, 1992, p.14) This means that American movies and TV are a cultural form for discovering what the United States is and for describing its situation. The most visible manifestation of the shift from modernity to postmodernity may be found in American movies and TV in the late twentieth-century. I would like to consider the cultural situation of modern ideology and the public through the Hollywood movie as popular culture. In this paper, I will discuss two movies which each represent modernity and postmodernity as examples.

A. Analysis of the features of modern society in the Movie, *Lolita*

The movie *Lolita* represents American popular culture well. Before entering a discussion of the movie, I would like to clarify the features of modernity. It has always been discussed in contrast to postmodernity, and I will look at modernity first in accordance with their

chronological order.

According to Anthony Giddens: '[M]odernity refers to modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence.' (Giddens, 1990, p.1) Modernity is a challenge to the traditional powers and the authority of the Christian Church and rather settled ways of life. Modernity is a style of life and social organization. Particularly interesting from our point of view here are these features of modernity: the development of a car society, a belief in progress and emergence of a consumer society. I will discuss how these are reflected in the film *Lolita*.

Before going into an analysis of *Lolita* in terms of the features of modernity, it is necessary to introduce the summary of the film here. While *Lolita* is a love story of a European, Humbert and an American girl, Lolita, it is also the movie of the United States mass production society which Vladimir Nabokov drew from an immigrant's point of view.

In the Postwar era, the attractive resort town of Ramsdale, New Hampshire, provides the setting for *Lolita*. Humbert rents a room in the suburban house of Charlotte Haze. Humbert immediately falls in love with Charlotte's 12 year old daughter, Lolita. Charlotte and Lolita do not get along at all, and Charlotte decides to send Lolita off to summer camp. Meanwhile, Charlotte proposes marriage to Humbert. Despite his dislike for her, Humbert accepts her proposal, because the marriage will give him the opportunity to be with Lolita all the time. While Lolita is in summer camp, Charlotte is suddenly hit by a car. Soon afterwards, Humbert

goes to fetch Lolita from camp. They begin a driving tour and stay in motels. While touring, they are followed by Clare Quilty, a demented writer with an obsession for child pornography and an intense love for Lolita. Suddenly, Lolita vanishes, leaving Humbert all alone. About three years after Lolita's disappearance, Humbert receives a letter from the now 18-year-old Lolita, announcing that she is married to Dick, a poor youth who dreams of becoming rich. Humbert goes to her house and knows the truth that Quilty has sexually abused Lolita. Humbert goes to Quilty's house, and murders him.

Let us now consider the features of modern society mentioned above.

1. The development of a car society

Michel Aglietta argues that the 'consumption norm' created by Fordism is 'governed by two commodities: the standardized housing... and the automobile... Both commodities—and especially, of course, the motor car—were amenable to the techniques of mass production.' (qtd. in Callinicos, 1989, p.151) The advent of the car society was marked by the establishment of the mass production system of automobiles by Henry Ford at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States. Due to the introduction of mass production, the price of the car fell. This enabled laborers to own one. In 1924, through mass production, Ford was able to reduce the price of a car from 850 dollars to 290 dollars. This transfigured people from laborers to consumers.

The development of the car society was also encouraged by the need of people living in the vast country. The invention of the car meant that it became possible for people to move away

from the crowded cities into the suburbs, where they could enjoy more comfort and security. The larger the number of people in the suburbs, the higher the demand for cars. Life in the suburbs meant frequent drives to and from shopping centers, with a lot of commodities on return trips. This life style made the 'station wagon' very popular among suburban people. This may also be because it was useful for leisure activities on week and holidays. Thus, the station wagon came to represent the suburban person. In *Lolita*, Humbert and Lolita live in a suburban town of Ramsdale and ride in a station wagon. They also travel in it from town to town, each with motels, gas stations, and diners, which are characteristic of the car society.

2. A belief in progress

I now proceed to the issue of a belief in progress. To quote Lyon: 'Belief in Providence, that once sustained confidence about the future, found a surrogate in Progress.' (Lyon, 1997, p.70) There is an expectation that progress leads to happiness. This belief, that the quality of life would keep improving indefinitely, was one of the notable features of modernity. People also believed that progress could make true their desire to become rich. These beliefs can be traced to the immigrants who came to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. These immigrants were able to get good jobs and be successful, because a cheap labor force was needed at that time. Their success led to the rumor that there was a better life in America and the number of immigrants reached 14 million by 1924. They also wanted to become 'real' Americans. In order to prove that they were 'real' Americans immigrants imitated Americans' way of life, such as purchasing the car and living in a suburb. Immigrants took consumptive

actions in order to gain a life equivalent to their 'American' neighbor, and to maintain their quality of life. Thus it was necessary for laborers to have sufficient wages in order to be 'American' consumers. This was not limited to immigrants. People became happy if they got a better-paid job and their quality of life was improved compared with that before. People believed that owning things would lead them to a happier social status. In order to fill a desire without limits, people dreamt of and demanded a life with good income. Belief in progress was produced in this way.

Dick's desire is a good example to illustrate this belief in the movie. Lolita's husband, Dick, is a poor young man in debt. Dick wishes to escape the difficulties of living. Dick believes that there is a marvelous employment opportunity for him in Alaska, and that he could go there if he had enough money to pay off his debt and to buy traveling tickets. In this way, he expects that progress, which in this case represented by Alaska, leads to happiness.

3. Emergence of a consumer society

The third issue is emergence of a consumer society. Emergence of a consumer society in the United States embodies the concept of progress that is represented by the term 'American way of life'. Things Americans purchase and own are connected with their identity. Living in the suburb, drinking cola, eating a hamburger, and wearing a dress of a specific brand make their own image. Nabokov made Lolita appear as a person from this type of such consumer society. The advent of mass production in the 1920s made it possible for an emergence of same type commodities such as washing machine and vacuum cleaner thanks to reducing prices. Juliet B

Schor expresses this period as follows:

‘The story of this period was that people looked to their own neighborhoods for their spending cues, and the neighbors grew more and more alike in what they had.

Like compared with like and strove to become even more alike.’ (Schor, 1998, p.8)

The people were workers and the basis of social life was their relationship with the process of production in the modernity. The advent of mass production made outpouring of identical commodities possible. As people looked at their neighbors and wanted to imitate them, they came to consume and own the same things, including refrigerators and washing machines, besides automobiles. Identity as Americans was built by consumption in those days. As a result, Their ways of life became more alike.

We can see Lolita eat chips and drink Cola everywhere in the movie. The cut, Lolita is sipping from a bottle of Coca-Cola, is one of the symbols of American popular culture. As we have seen, the three features of modernity, the development of the car society, a belief in progress and emergence of consumer society, can be seen in the movie, *Lolita*.

IV. What are the postmodern features of American popular culture?

There was a belief in progress and revolution with each generation having more commodities and knowledge than its predecessor in modernity. However, this situation changed with the advent of a new period of history. Giddens states, ‘Loss of a belief in “progress”, of course, is one of the factors that underlies the dissolution of “narrative” of history’, (Giddens, 1990, p.10) and admits that we have entered a new era, cut loose from the reassurance of

tradition. This new era is, by some authors, referred to as 'postmodernity,' though Giddens does not employ this term.

A. What is postmodernity?

The term postmodernity generally means a specific historical period, defined, for example, by Terry Eagleton as follows:

'Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.'

(Eagleton, 1996, p.vii)

After pointing out that a style of culture in postmodernity reflects epochal change in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, he goes on to say: 'pluralistic art blurs the boundaries between "high" and "popular" culture.' (Eagleton, 1996, p.vii)

Postmodernism denies the values of modernity and it is the shift to a new time and the emergence of a new society. According to Ellen Meiksins Wood, postmodernity generally represents a phase of capitalism marked by certain distinctive economic and technological characteristics for example the 'information age', 'lean production', 'flexible accumulation', 'disorganized capitalism', 'consumerism'. (Wood, 1999, p.113) In the postmodern world, progress of such technologies as information technology, and the structural changes of industry, have altered the world view, including political philosophies and economic policies.

Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives, such as God, Marxism, scientific progress, stating: 'this incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.' (Lyotard, 1984, p.xxxiv) Postmodernity challenges the belief of progress in which economies must continue to grow and the quality of life improves endlessly. In other words, postmodernity refers to a shift away from faith in humanly engineered progress.

B. Analysis of the features of postmodern society in the Movie, *Blade Runner*

Cinema is sensitive to change of time. It points to the history of the country, an identity, culture, nature, ideology directly or indirectly. The styles of postmodern cinema include simulation and hyperreality, inter-textuality, the rapid flow of signs and images and lost history. I would like to discuss these characteristics of postmodern popular culture using the movie *Blade Runner* (1982).

The summary of *Blade Runner* is as follows: Early in the 21st century, the Tyrell Corporation, in the industrial wasteland of Los Angeles, makes robots called replicants, bio-engineered beings virtually identical to humans. Replicants were used off-world as slaves, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets. After a mutiny by a NEXUS 6 in an off-world colony, some replicants escaped. Blade Runner, Rick Deckard, as a killer of replicants had orders to shoot to kill, upon detection, any trespassing replicant. Before starting the job Deckard visits the Tyrell Corporation where he meets Rachel, a replicant girl with whom he will

fall in love. Just as Deckard is about to be killed, Rachel intervenes and shoots the replicant, saving Deckard's life.

The movie *Blade Runner*, in which images of genetic engineering and information technology appear so often, is a work which gives us the opposite impressions from *Lolita*, which is full of emotion. This contrast is one of those between postmodernity and modernity.

1. Simulation and hyperreality

To analyze the consumer society, Jean Baudrillard formulated the concept of simulacrum/simulation. He uses the term simulacrum in almost the same sense as a 'sign' in semiology. He argues that the distinction between simulated objects and their simulating representations has disappeared as the quantity of signs and images has increased. He further claims that we are living in a world of 'simulation', where media-generated images function independently of any reality external to them. New forms of technology, such as TV and movies, help a shift from a productive social order to a reproductive social order in which simulation constitute the world. For Baudrillard the postmodern world is a world of simulacra, where we can no longer differentiate between reality and simulation. He points out that people consume not to satisfy their desire but to clarify the difference from others in the contemporary consumer society. Therefore, in postmodern consumer society, a thing turns into a sign and people consume a thing according to the principle of difference. The simulation society is the world where simulacra becomes real. Baudrillard organized the history of the production of simulacra into three stages in the way that the signs relate to their referents. In the 'classical' era, simulation

takes the form of counterfeiting. In the second stage, the 'industrial' era, mass-production infinitely reproduces objects. Finally, in our contemporary postmodern order, the imaginary and the real have become confused. Simulation breaks the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'.

Blade Runner shows the transmutation of difference and otherness contrasting human beings with artificial life forms, replicants. Artificial life can be said to be the most postmodern of all the science. It is simulacra in that it is difficult to distinguish it from its real counterparts. We can find a piece of evidence for hyperrealism in *Blade Runner*. For example, video phones are used in the movie: This shows the progress of the information and communication technologies, which makes virtual reality possible. This technology suggests that people live in the new society which has overcome the limitations of real time and space.

2. Inter-textuality

Let us now turn to the concept of inter-textuality. This concept is defined by Stuart Sim as follows: 'Many classic literary texts ... are woven from other texts: references, citations and quotations tumbling together in disorienting superabundance.' He adds: 'Postmodernism embraces an extreme notion of intertextuality, in which the play of meaning is infinite, in which anything goes.' (Sim, 2001, p.285) In the context of film, the term can be taken to mean being dependent on patterns of meaning established in other films, or in other art forms. A common form of inter-textuality across films is that of 'genre' defined by recurrent characters, settings, themes, plots and even stars. Genre is, to use Monaco's phrase, 'the defined mythic structures of

the popular story types.’ (Monaco, 1977, p.299) However, movies in the 1970s are made up of several genres. For example, *Star Wars* is not only a Science Fiction but a Historical Romances, a Western, a War movie and so forth.

Now I will examine how the film *Blade Runner* is inter-textual. Although this film would traditionally be categorised as a science fiction, it evades such a water-tight genre categorisation because it has a lot of characteristics of other genres, for example, love story, action and detective story. Take the relationship between Rachael and Deckard, for example. This relationship is depicted in a typically boy-meets-girl style. The film contains a lot of cuts in which Deckard fights with the replicants as if in an action movie. And Deckard’s continued search for the replicants is comparable to a detective story.

3. The rapid flow of signs and images

Contemporary society fills the rapid flow of signs and images to all the corners of the everyday life. According to Mike Featherstone, the overproduction of signs and reproduction of images and simulations leads to a loss of stable meaning. (Featherstone, 1991, p.15) The consumer’s desire of getting ‘high up’ is converted to consumption, and consumers continuously ask for something new. Fiske called such a desire ‘the ideology of progress’. Postmodern consumers purchase goods without necessity because they are stimulated by advertisement. The commodity of a famous brand is still popular even in a state of depression. This is because a ‘sign’ called a ‘brand’ stimulates the consumer’s desire. When consumers receive an image of a commodity through advertisement, they find the different image from

original one which the dominant encodes the ideology, 'Buy it'.

And now we are back to *Blade Runner*. The neon-lit, dark, downtown streets are populated by the lower class dregs of society, an odd assortment of police, Asians, Spanish, street gangs and punks carrying glowing umbrella handles. The scene cuts to a huge electrical advertising media which is the giant, smiling image of a geisha girl. Electrical advertising throughout the film features sponsors, including TDK, Atari, Coca-Cola, Pan-Am, and Budweiser. A blinking, huge overhead blimp cruises above - its loudspeakers advertise elsewhere with neon signs and huge graphics. Such superfluous signs and images through advertisements make *Blade Runner* postmodern.

4. Lost history

The next feature to discuss is 'lost history' which is related to the postmodern attitude of incredulity towards metanarratives. This effectively means discontinuity with the past, history. After pointing out that history is foregrounded, Lyon asked what we should do with the postmodern world. Lyon states: 'Is our "loss of history" a permanent condition or a temporary amnesia?' (Lyon, 1999, p.4)

The city in *Blade Runner* is a hotchpotch of Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York, and other metropolitan areas. It apparently lacks any history or tradition behind it. Now it is in ruins, as if people there refused to be part of a history of progress and accumulation, which is a defining characteristic of a city. History is also a defining characteristic of a person. Without history—'memory' is a more appropriate expression with a person—one cannot have a sense of

coherence, integrity, identity. The replicants are denied memories. There is a cut where one of the replicants, Rachael, shows Deckard, a Blade runner, her mother's photo. Why would a replicant collect photos? They need memories. Rachael's human qualities are the result of implanted memories and photographs that provide an historical past stretching back to her childhood.

C. Other Forms of Popular culture

Let us take another example to illustrate the feature of postmodernity, simulation and reality using other forms of popular culture. Baudrillard chooses Disneyland as an illustration of simulation; he states:

'Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.' (Baudrillard, 1994, p.12)

According to Baudrillard, simulation is 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal'. (Baudrillard, 1994, p.1) In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard summarizes the situation of the 'real' in the postmodern world. The 'real' transformed into the 'hyperreal' and it has disappeared completely into the process of a simulation. For Baudrillard, hyperrealism is a characteristic feature of postmodernity.

Baudrillard refers to Disneyland, pointing out that 'Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra'. (Baudrillard, 1994, p.12) Distinctions between true and false are

meaningless in Disneyland. Disneyland is the digest of the American way of life. When a person enters Disneyland he or she instantly becomes a resident of Disneyland. Mickey Mouse suddenly becomes real, not something from TV or comics. People experience hyperreality as a reality. Art and everyday life are mixed up in a mishmash of images. Disney's characters personify common humanity. For example, the frankness of Mickey Mouse, the virginal innocence of Snow White shows, the virginity of Sleeping Beauty and even Walt's image symbolises as 'kind Uncle Walt'. What has to be noticed here is that they are 'simulacra' and their origins are American. Baudrillard goes on to point out that Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland. (Baudrillard, 1994, p.12) Distinctions between objects and their representations dissolved, and only simulacra left there.

TV is another good example of simulacra. According to Marc O'Day, postmodern TV is characterized by 'a high degree of excess, fragmentation, heterogeneity, hybridization, aestheticization, stylization, intertextuality, recycling, bricolage, self-referentiality, and parody and pastiche'. (O'Day, 2001, p.117) While TV has an ability to mediate between the viewer and reality, it became hard for the viewer to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction because TV is both an entertainment and an information medium. Consider as an example the Gulf War. The War was televised live and by CNN and watched in many countries. The argument as with Disneyland applies here: that the imaginary hide reality no more exists outside than inside. It was a televisual spectacle and every viewer could see what was happening at the Gulf. The War is a good illustration of hyperreality. There is no longer a reality. TV shows us a lot of images.

The images are practically fireworks or a video game. The actual tragedy is not transmitted to us. Images from TV are all there were. Such media images create hyperreality, and the world of hyperreality is constructed of simulacra.

I will now discuss another quality of TV. TV collapses the hierarchal distinction between high and popular culture. TV programs mix rock and classical music. The feature of postmodern world is expressed well by Sim when he says the following: 'Anything goes.' (Sim, 2001, p.285) The distinction is becoming increasingly blurred in the postmodern society. Prior to mechanization, only the elite were able to enjoy paintings, music, and theater, and there was little chance for common people to meet with those forms of high culture in Europe. Walter Benjamin states that high culture has 'aura,' which is the perceived authenticity that comes from its being original. (Sim, 2001, p.186) This 'aura' may produce a tense atmosphere that could be felt when people meet high culture. In other words, high culture is something original, individual, and rare, to which only the limited elite is allowed to access. Matthew Arnold states that culture at that time was not meant for the popular but for the elite. (Tuner, 1996, p.39) High cultures were also the symbol of the elite's social status and their economic sense of superiority. American popular culture was formed on the conditions of mass society; European high culture was formed from the privileged classes.

These changed with the advent of the technological reproduction of cultural artefacts, such as TV, which has enabled people to enjoy popular culture whenever and anywhere they want. In the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin says, works of art have lost their 'aura'. (Sim,

2001, p.198) Now everyone can enjoy movies, records, photographs, and fine art as a result of the invention of duplicating technology. Since the technique of reproduction makes it possible to produce duplication in large quantities, mass production makes art no longer an elite possession.

V. Conclusion

So far I have outlined the emergence of consumer society in modern era and the transmutation of consumer society in postmodern era. Metamorphosis of consumer society shifts from economies based on production in modernity to economies based on the consumption of information and service in postmodernity. Genre was the prime mover of the classic Hollywood cinema. Take Western for example; Western embodied a lot of the national myths, individualism; a belief in progress, the frontier, in the United States. Now Hollywood is confronted by a new world of anarchic dimensions, due to the technological developments. I emphasized the role that images play in the postmodern consumer society which gives culture an importance. If from the perspectives of modern consumerism the object of production is consumption which satisfies people's desire through purchasing commodities, however, from the perspectives of postmodern consumerism the object of production is controlled by consumption which stimulates signs in the media and advertising.

We will now get down to the center of the issue; to what extent is American popular culture postmodern. The movie represents American popular culture and consumption society well, as stated above. *Lolita* and *Blade Runner* are good examples to illustrate the features of American society. We have seen the cultural dimension of postmodern condition in American society by

discussing the postmodern movie, *Blade Runner*. Recall *Blade Runner* is full of fragmentation and mishmash of artificial images. A Japanese girl, Chinese dragons and Egyptian pyramids are mixed with advertisements for multinational companies. Images of clean high-tech buildings and those of damaged buildings are mixed in the movie. Replicants have to collect family photos in order to recall their history because they have lost history. 'Reality' itself is in question in the movie. Replicants are not 'real' human but simulacra. Featherstone defines 'postmodern society' as follows: 'the overproduction of signs and reproduction of images and simulations leads to a loss of stable meaning. The simulational world is postmodern culture.' (Featherstone, 1991, p.15) Replicants want to be 'real' people. 'Real' transformed into the 'hyperreal' in the postmodern world and it disappeared into the process of simulation, and become, to use Baudrillard's phrase, 'its own pure simulacrum'. (Baudrillard, 1994, p.6) We can see a lot of electrical advertising from the beginning to the end. Superfluous signs and images make *Blade Runner* postmodern. It follows from these observations that *Blade Runner* has enough evidence that American popular culture is to what extent postmodern.

Let us look at postmodernity from a different angle. Postmodernity has always been described in contrast to modernity. With the shift from modernity to postmodernity, belief in progress evaporated, leaving the superfluous advertising signs and image through media and virtual realities. Recall our earlier discussion of the features of modernity represented in *Lolita*. Aspects of life were closely connected to cars in the United States. Development of the car society and belief in progress gradually produced the 'American way of life'. The fundamental

idea supporting modernization is the belief in progress. People believed that the emergence of modernity would lead them to a happier and safer social status. The development of an information technology has fulfilled the dream of the belief in progress. The scene of urban decay in *Blade Runner* indicates the breakdown of the belief in progress. Progress is in ruins. We may see vestiges of modernity, in other word vestiges of progress, in buildings and streets presented in *Blade Runner*. We can see belief in progress abandoned in *Blade Runner*. The fact that *Blade Runner* does not have the modern futures in comparison with *Lolita* makes it clear is that *Blade Runner* is a postmodern movie. It is not to be denied that American popular culture is to a large extent postmodern on the grounds that these two pieces of evidence.

Those who live in the postmodern era are those who negotiate for desire in the superfluous signs and images sent through media. People react to the superfluous signs and images and change them to consumptive pleasure quickly. Although postmodernity replaced modernity and requires the redefinition of the essence of human existence, it has never offered the framework of the new view or people's way of life which structures the world instead of the framework of modernity. Therefore, Americans have to find their own values and a way of life using superfluous information, and they are forced to live in an unstable situation. Postmodernity is the term which represents an uneasy era. American society seems to be undergoing a series of major transformations called postmodernity in terms of global processes. The world, in which we live today especially the United States, is postmodern in that it governs people not through oppression such as war or violence but stimulates people's desire using overflowing image and

signs through media.

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