

Pre-Modernism Article

by Charles Vallance, Founding Partner of VCCP

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At times of crisis we tend to start asking questions, albeit rather belatedly. Unsurprisingly, the questions are coming thick and fast at the moment. You hear them in focus groups, you hear them on the way to work, you read them in blogs.

They nearly all revolve around the question of trust. It is clear that the unfolding financial crisis has undermined far more than our trust in financial institutions. It is a symptom of more pervasive misgivings. People are now questioning a whole set of assumptions which, for a generation, were taken for granted; questions about consumerism, materialism, sustainability, even the viability of capitalism itself. There is a widespread belief that fundamental change is required.

The clamour for change does not feel like a passing trend produced in the heat of the moment. When the fog clears, one suspects that some things will be permanently different; that 2009 will be seen as the year when one era finished and another began.

However, the question I first want to address isn't about what lies ahead. Before that we need to establish what we're leaving behind. It's easy to say that things need to be different. But different from what? If we are at an epoch defining moment, we first have to understand what's being swept away before we can fully define what's being ushered in

So what will they call the era that is coming to a close? Trawling through Wikipedia, the term "postmodern" seems to measure up quite well. It's a word we've all more or less heard of, which is a start. According to Wikipedia it's also a cliché. Even better.

But what does it mean? This is where it gets tricky, because postmodernism doesn't really lend itself to old fashioned notions such as meaning. Apparently, it's more about uncertainty and ambiguity or even, "an implosion of meaning" characterised by "a decline in cultural reference points and hierarchies".

It's meant to define the era that came after the certainties of modernism, when a belief in social and technological progress gave us things like high rise flats, space travel, the NHS, and Concorde. By comparison, postmodernity is all rather flabby and amorphous, characterised by moral neutrality and self-reference. It will probably be known as the Age of Celebrity and, to be honest, it sounds like we're well shot of it.

But that doesn't stop Lily Allen being scared by the prospect, as she explains in The Fear, with lyrics that read like an epitaph to the consumerism that has surrounded her all her life;

"I am a weapon of massive consumption, and it's not my fault it's how I'm programmed to function ... I don't know what's right or what's real anymore ... I'm being taken over by fear"

Of course, being scared of what comes next hardly puts her in a minority at the moment.

But, whilst it is too early to look for green shoots in the economy, there are plenty of promising signs about the values that are coming to the fore culturally.

Space prevents a detailed description of the many trends which will shape the new era, but a few edited highlights should help give a flavour of an emergent value system. Here are four for starters;

Using vs wasting; long overdue, many would say, we will see a growing aversion to waste. Sustainability and thrift will become mainstream, clothes will be repaired, vintage will be chic, used will be as good as new. For clues look at the rise of eBay or, more recently, Freecycle, waiting lists for allotments, rocketing sales of composters, declining sales of ready meals, India Knight's Thrift Book, Delia Smith re-issuing Frugal Food, SIM only mobile tariffs, the imminent launch of Landshare, the resilience of the used vs new car market, the success of Bag, Borrow or Steal etc.

Being good at something; an equally heartwarming trend, we are seeing the return of skill, particularly amongst young people. User generation and upload culture have created an environment where there is more incentive and more opportunity for teenagers to define themselves by what they do, what they are good at, as opposed to what they consume or how they badge themselves. New levels of fame and social reputation are available to those who master a skill, who are excellent at something in whatever field, whether it be music, sport, knitting, make-up, boarding, singing, writing, designing, cooking, growing, dancing. For clues go to YouTube and search Guitar Guy, Moped Dance, Lauren Luke (make-up girl), Stylista, Project Runway etc

Trading vs consuming; we are seeing big shifts in the value exchange as customers increasingly recognise and exert their buying power. This involves a search for added value beyond the confines of any given transaction. The added value gained may be ethical (eg Starbucks and Fair Trade), it may be to do with the business model (eg Blyk or Spotify), it may be to do with extra rewards for customers (eg O2 Priority), or it may simply be to do with heightened levels of identification and participation (eg Walker's Do Us a Flavour).

Social vs individual objects; much has been written about the decline in social institutions and forums, be this the state, the church, the family, the banking system, the political system, broken Britain etc, etc. I'm pleased to say that my fourth trend, like the previous three, can be seen as a counterbalance. Whilst we should not think that individualism is in decline (look at the trends towards personalisation and control), we can certainly say that individualism is no longer at the expense of more shared values and endeavours.

Driven in part by the possibilities of technology and social media, we are seeing a resurgence of communal and collective behaviours. For clues look at the rise and rise of live music events, karaoke, book clubs, knitting clubs, crowd sourcing sites such as Wikipedia, Trip Adviser, Dopplr, Flickr etc. A big question for brands in the future, therefore, will be "how are you helping to create a social as well as individual object?"

So that's it. If the above trends hold true, the new era ahead of us should be a little more communal and shared, purchases will be more considered, young people will understand the importance of developing a skill and we will be more likely to live within our means financially and ecologically. It all sounds strangely old-fashioned, with many of the cultural green shoots involving a re-discovery of behaviours and attitudes that went out of vogue over fifty years ago, thus pre-dating both postmodernism or even modernism. Perhaps, therefore, the new era we are looking at should be dubbed Pre-Modernism.