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IS POSTMODERNISM IN NEED OF ENLIGHTENMENT? REVISITING ROUSSEAU'S IDEAS ON LANGUAGE, EDUCATION, AND ART

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This discussion highlights the enduring relevance of Rousseau's discourses on language, education, and art by contrasting their ideals with the destabilizing effects of Postmodernism, such as simulacra and hyperreality. Namely, Postmodernism has attempted to discard its predecessors, leading to profound shifts in how we conceptualize communication, education, and artistic expression. Language, whose origin and history reveal its potential for genuine understanding, is now often instrumentalized for manipulation and misrepresentation. Education, once aligned with virtue and self-actualization, is increasingly viewed through the lens of power dynamics and commodification, prioritizing utilitarian training over intellectual and moral growth. Art, which Rousseau envisioned as a pursuit of spiritual and aesthetic perfection, is frequently reduced to market-driven sensationalism. The paper, therefore, argues that revisiting Rousseau's ideals holds the potential to restore integrity and stability to these essential domains through the proper conceptualization of the notion "enlightenment" that transcends nominalism, embracing genuine intellectual and spiritual illumination. Such a revitalization is crucial for fostering individual and collective self-realization in an era marked by epistemic uncertainty and cultural fragmentation.

Keywords: Rousseau, language, education, art, enlightenment, Postmodernism

1. Introduction

In his discourses on language, education, and art, Rousseau consistently differentiated between the genuine illumination of the mind and formal education. Consequently, the philosopher anticipated that many societies would not realize themselves as genuine because they would fail to pursue and achieve enlightenment, by which he meant understanding the essence of things and clearly distinguishing the fundamental from the superfluous. Ultimately, Rousseau broke away from his own "Age of Reason," criticizing it for featuring enlightenment

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only nominally, not actually. Postmodernism, we argue, is yet another cultural-historical-intellectual movement that fails to achieve individual and collective self-realization. Its key attributes—simulacra and hyperreality—destabilize presence, identity, and historical progress. More importantly, several traits of Postmodernism stand in direct opposition to the basic assumptions of enlightenment as an ideal of mental and spiritual illumination, particularly its destabilization of epistemic certainty and its creation of distorted social and psychological conditions that deny the historical inevitability of dialectic (Habermas, 1987). However flawed it may have been, Modernism at least perceived reason as a system of procedural rules that could be used to achieve consensus among communicating subjects; conversely, Postmodernism has tried to dissipate this emancipatory potential (Habermas, 1981). Given this, we have initiated a philosophy-driven discussion because, after all, a proper understanding of the issues and dialectics can serve as catalysts of social change. In the discussion, Postmodernism is seen to be in dire need of enlightenment because it has cultivated a critical perception of language, knowledge, and art that facilitates media manipulation, transhumanist fantasies, and the synthetic creation of culture *de novo*. Having said this, it is important to emphasize that Rousseau's political philosophy remains outside the scope of this paper. Our focus rests on his insight that a genuine society depends upon language that reflects profound conceptual meaning, education inseparable from moral goodness and spiritual liberty, and a culture purified of idle art and excessive luxury.

2. Beyond Terminology: Defining Enlightenment, the Enlightenment, and Postmodernism

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "enlightenment" signifies "the state of understanding something." In a religious context, it denotes achieving the highest spiritual state. Seeking a deeper connotation, Haffner (1864) offered a more profound description:

Enlightenment is a sublime word, if one goes back to its meaning; it means illumination of the spirit through truth, liberation from the shadows of error, or uncertainty, of doubt. Enlightenment is, in its deepest meaning, the transfiguration (Verklärung) of reason. (1)

When preceded by the definite article—"the Enlightenment"—the term refers specifically to "the period in the late 17th and 18th centuries in Europe when many people began to emphasize the importance of science and reason, rather than religion and tradition" (Schmidt, 2006). Among many influential figures of the epoch, Rousseau is central to this discussion because he implied that *the Enlightenment needed enlightenment*. He thus envisioned the

illumination of the mind and spirit as a dialectical process, a continuous effort to recreate conditions of genuine liberation.

In contrast, postmodernism as an idea denotes a contemporary condition characterized primarily by the rejection of objectivism and universalism inherited from the Enlightenment and Modernism. The term was solidified in philosophical discourse by Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). Postmodern thought often carries an apocalyptic sense, stemming from the impression that Western civilization has reached a point of culmination (Langford, 1992). While this may seem pessimistic, the Postmodern era and its wide-ranging set of developments in critical theory, philosophy, art, culture, architecture, etc., cannot fully reject its precursors, becoming anti-traditional. As Derrida suggests, understanding is necessarily a repeated gesture; it's a form of critical engagement with tradition (Derrida, 1980). This inherent connection to the past makes one question how it is possible to be fundamentally "anti" the core of Rousseau's commitment to spiritual and intellectual illumination.

3. Revisiting Discourse on Language

3.1. From Embodied Expression to Virtual Simulation: Rousseau's Theory and Postmodern Practice

Among the many eighteenth-century theorists interested in the evolution of language, who greatly contributed to philosophical debates about its gestural and conventional systems, Rousseau occupies a prominent place in academic discourse. He argued that the conjunction of society and language is as fundamental as the link between language and thought. His most important ideas on language theory are found in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, composed between 1753 and 1761 and published posthumously. In it, Rousseau posits that language binds a community together because humans are social animals inclined toward interaction and communication. Furthermore, in his *Discourse on Inequality*, he surmised that people consist of an unchanging core (their nature), which may account for a shared cognitive apparatus, and an ever-changing surface shaped by historical, social, and cultural circumstances (Blackwell, Duncan, & Know, 2009). Rousseau also observed that the languages of different peoples are themselves influenced by the patterns of community life from which they emerge (Wokler & Brooke, 2012). Consequently, to properly understand a speaker's message, we must investigate their social, cultural, and emotional background, as well as their reasons for communicating.

More than many of his contemporaries, Rousseau insisted that language is strongly associated with music, dance, rhythm, accent, and gesture. He claimed that visual

communication (the language of gesture) is more objective, whereas auditory communication (the voice) is more passionate. In other words, gestures convey necessity, but spoken language transmits or evokes emotion (Jones, 2006). Rousseau suggests that both gestural and vocal language are equally natural and beneficial. Sound captures attention more readily and emphasizes tone, stress, rhythm, and intonation. Gesticulation, however, can show more in less time, making it more articulate, efficient, and distinctive (Davies, 2012). To establish a Postmodern discourse in line with this framework, we could pay close attention to language in relation to philosophical truth, honesty, and vivid verbal and non-verbal expressions that reflect the fullness of thought. In fact, many shortcomings of the Postmodern perception of dialogue are related to features of virtual communication, which now constitutes a significant portion of human interaction. The main issue with online dialogue is that it often presupposes disguise and carries potential for fraud and abuse. This undermines Rousseau's pillars of genuine human interaction, such as authenticity, sympathy, and goodness, all of which exclude ulterior motives or pluralistic games of interpretation. The increased reliance on words and graphics in virtual communication, at the expense of nonverbal cues and vocal tone, has contributed to a decline in trust, accurate emotional understanding, and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Moreover, participants in online discussions rarely adhere to the universal rules of communication advocated by theorists like Habermas.

In a claim reminiscent of Rousseau's unchanging human core, Habermas seeks to rehabilitate a rationality grounded in language and communication, which presupposes a "world of common certainties and meanings lying behind everyday communication" (Brignoli, 2018: 21). Attempting to preserve rationality as an Enlightenment legacy, Habermas's theory of communicative action conflicts with the Postmodern view that consensus through dialogue is impossible due to local and linguistic pluralism. Conversely, Habermas (1987) perceives language as a medium enabling self-validation, emancipation, and recognition of others through intersubjective understanding—a possibility that depends on a shared background of resources. Therefore, the rationalism that Postmodernism could rehabilitate from earlier epochs is one that acknowledges individualism while remaining cognizant of a base of shared experience. This offers a potential path toward empirical validation of our claims (Habermas, 1987) at a time when sign systems are often seen as having lost their capacity to express the reality of their referents reliably.

3.2. Rousseau's Views on the Origin of Language: From Passionate Cry to Social Mask

In the second chapter of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1986), Rousseau puts forward an unusual precondition of all communication between human beings, which is our innate desire for speech:

As soon as one man was recognized by another as a sentient, thinking being similar to himself, the desire or need to communicate his feelings and thoughts made him seek the means to do so. (1.14)

Here, Rousseau frames communication as a fundamental desire rather than a mere pragmatic function. Language, therefore, originated in the depths of human passion, not from a utilitarian need to transmit ideas for social or economic survival. In explaining language's provenance, Rousseau identifies this fervent urge as both its source and the pathway toward greater logic. He argues that language emerged from the growing need to convey our strongest emotions, suggesting a socially conscious understanding of linguistic development (Jones, 2015). Furthermore, Rousseau dissented from prevailing views of his time, contending it was profoundly incorrect to base theories of language origin on the necessity for factual reasoning. Even though the physical demands of survival might foster anti-social tendencies, Rousseau held that the cry of another awakens innate compassion and inspires humans to consider each other's inner lives. He asserts that the precondition for all communication is the mutual desire to make ourselves known. Once people recognize others as beings like themselves, they naturally aspire to communicate thoughts and feelings. As Davies (2012) summarizes, "We seek to communicate what we are as sensing/thinking beings—indirectly to communicate our selves" (5). Herein lies a clear distinction between genuine and disingenuous language. Successful communication relies on signs, gestures, and speech propelled by the desire to know others and reveal ourselves to them. However, the language of Rousseau's era was often a tool for creating pseudo-reality. Ankersmit (2013) notes the eighteenth-century fondness for disguise and masquerade, exemplified by the Venice carnival. He describes a social life that fostered a "nominalist" conception of the self, where individuals used specific linguistic registers to perform social roles. The issue of hidden identity persists today, but it is intertwined with a new social phenomenon: the systematic misrepresentation of the self. Virtually exchanged messages often serve as insidious tools for self-liking and self-promotion. In such cases, language does not spring from a genuine desire for mutual understanding, help, or self-revelation, but from artificially multiplied needs for power, status, and material possession. This signifies that society has reached the point Rousseau warned against: using language not to present ideas to others, but to misrepresent ourselves to them (Blackwell et al., 2009).

Rousseau also claimed the earliest lexicon was purely figurative, with literal meanings developing later. Figurative language, in his view, is always a transfer of sense, as passion leads us to perceive what we desire or fear, not the actual object. To illustrate, in the *Essay* (Rousseau, 1781/1986), he provides the example of a fearful encounter:

Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them *giants*. After many experiences, he recognizes that these so-called giants are neither bigger nor stronger than he. Their stature does not approach the idea he had initially attached to the word *giant*. So he invents another name common to them and to him, such as the name *man*, for example, and leaves *giant* to the fictitious object that had impressed him during his illusion. That is how the figurative word is born before the literal word, when our gaze is held in passionate fascination; and how it is that the first idea it conveys to us is not that of the truth. (3.22)

Rousseau thus envisions the first human encounter as a terrifying event where fright triggers a form of poetry. Fear of interpersonal connection produced the earliest poetic descriptions: a fictional name born of illusion was offered first and later corrected by a literal word after repeated experience. Consequently, many Enlightenment theorists who took a historical view of language, including Rousseau, considered human language inherently poetic and humans poets by nature. Contrary to this, Postmodernism has affected our knowledge and perception by casting doubt on past metaphysical truths. Its suspicion of grand legitimizing narratives has been interpreted by some as signalling the "end of philosophy." Brignoli (2018) observes that abandoning the quest for truth would reduce language and the desire to communicate to mere contingency and heterogeneity. While Postmodern thinkers criticize purely instrumental reason, they paradoxically validate it by discarding metaphysical foundations. This reflects a 21st-century emphasis on scientific and technological thought, which often marginalizes the humanities as illegitimate or frivolous. However, the figurative origin of language in Rousseau's discourse is a valuable reminder of the importance of seemingly esoteric wordplay, which is myth and poetry. It not only helps us connect with our natural being but also elevates us to the essence of meaning through abstraction.

4. Revisiting Discourse on Education

4.1. Rousseau's Ideal of Learning vs. Postmodern Perspectives

In his treatise *Emile, or On Education* (1762/2020), Rousseau advances the idea that enlightenment and liberty can be achieved by raising a well-balanced, virtuous, and freethinking person through an education that fosters autonomy and avoids self-interest. He

outlines an educational system designed to preserve humanity's natural state against societal corruption. Accordingly, individuals should not be governed by appetites and artificial desires, which hinder the attainment of reason and virtue. Rousseau further describes education as self-actualization derived from three sources: nature, people, and things. He explains that the education of nature is "the inner growth of our organs and faculties," the education of men is "the use we learn to make of this growth," and the education of things is "what we gain by our experience of our surroundings" (1762/2020: 10). Since nature lies beyond our control, the other two modes of education should follow its lead. This principle is reflected in Rousseau's warning, "Treat your scholar according to his age" (1762/2020: 98), which acknowledges the active, restless nature of childhood. As we mature, body and soul reach equilibrium, reducing the need for constant movement. Introducing books and formal study thus requires maturity of body, mind, and spirit. If we disrupt nature's order by pushing students toward tasks suited to an older self, "We shall produce a forced fruit immature and flavorless," or worse, "fruit which shall be rotten before it is ripe" (1762/2020: 99). In attempting such tasks, students would learn to mimic reason and deceive teachers to avoid punishment or gain rewards. Ultimately, such an education would teach them to privilege form over essence, wearing a mask of enlightenment while lacking genuine understanding.

It is also important to note that Rousseau objected to John Locke's proposal to reason with children. He observed that reason synthesizes all mental faculties and is therefore the last to develop. Using reason to instruct the young inverts the natural order, treating the ultimate goal as a means (1762/2020: 97). Instead of creating situations to fit a predetermined lesson, we should let understanding emerge spontaneously from experience. Rousseau thus advocated exposing learners to concrete examples, especially those embodying virtue, so that curiosity would naturally lead to questions. He cautioned that burdening a child with words and discourses devoid of context impedes the formation of mental images, which are essential for higher cognition. These images help children grasp relationships between objects, as no idea exists in isolation but always implies and maps onto others (1762/2020: 129).

To consider how Rousseau's theory applies today, we must recognize that institutionalized education is quintessentially a product of Modernism and its Enlightenment legacy. The scarcity of literature examining the Modern/Postmodern divide in educational theory is surprising, given that this debate has already peaked in art and social theory (Bloland, 1995). Modernist education inherits from the Enlightenment a faith in universals discoverable by reason and in language as a reliable means of accessing reality. Education built on these tenets holds that knowledge and expertise are crucial for problem-solving and

social improvement, with the common good resting on shared values and accepted rules of conduct. In critiquing the instrumental reason that shaped industrial society, Postmodern thinkers emphasize high-level cognition, creativity, and critical thinking. Influenced by cognitive research, leading educational theorists have advocated teaching for intelligence and recognizing each student's uniqueness, exemplified by Bloom's Taxonomy, Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment, Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, and Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. These frameworks underpin numerous teaching programs focused on data collection, problem-solving, and hypothesis testing. Another significant Postmodern trend is engaging students in research, project-based learning, and developmentally appropriate activities, positing that knowledge is constructed through experience. Finally, Postmodern education values cooperative learning, which has become one of the most extensively researched educational practices.

In his article "Themes of Postmodern Education," Shree Raj (2013) views these characteristics positively but also notes they reveal Postmodernism's dependence on earlier traditions, given that not only Rousseau but also Christian educational philosophy align with its emphasis on higher-level cognition. However, Postmodernism does not merely draw upon the legacy of previous epochs, which it generally seeks to negate, but it does so for questionable reasons. For instance, teaching for intelligence and recognizing student uniqueness often focuses on maximizing individual potential for the benefit of a post-industrial service economy, thereby reinforcing consumerism and commodification. Involving students in research and project-based tasks may not aim at profound comprehension through self-discovery, but is often supported by political, military, and corporate interests seeking competitive advantage in science and technology. Similarly, pervasive collaborative assignments in schools and universities may not be inspired by a desire to reduce rivalry and foster positive communication, but rather to simulate the teamwork environment proven most efficient and profitable for multinational corporations. Given Postmodernism's attack on the Enlightenment legacy in modern education, we must ask how it is possible to valorize forms of knowledge and learning that stem from a distrust of reason, language, and grand narratives—a distrust that Postmodernism itself cannot consistently uphold.

4.2 Rousseau's Ideal of Virtue vs. Postmodern Perspectives

Rousseau insists that children should be isolated from the domineering wills of others for as long as possible. Until adolescence, the tutor—often a manipulative figure—typically instructs students *how* to think rather than creating opportunities to stimulate their senses and learn through examples and physical activities. Conversely, when tutors do engage in

training young minds, they ought to become role models whom their learners can respect. Real authority cannot be attained unless it rests on esteem; therefore, Rousseau advises tutors to work diligently to be held in high regard. Another requirement for authority is goodness, which is why he urges tutors to: "Reconcile those who are at strife, prevent lawsuits; incline children to duty, fathers to kindness; promote happy marriages; prevent annoyances" (1762/2020: 106). The list of virtuous deeds and desirable behaviors does not end there. To avoid being a false authority, the tutor must be righteous, give charity, and practice works of mercy that relieve suffering. It follows that early education should not *teach* the truth or define virtue but rather *show* how virtue is practiced in immediate surroundings so that its diverse forms and effects become visible to children. Rousseau's discourses consistently remind scholars and educators not to seek excuses for themselves and to ensure that virtue accompanies knowledge and reason, as this is the only path toward individual and collective enlightenment.

Contrary to the aforementioned correlation between virtue and knowledge, Foucault insists that knowledge is inextricably bound to power. If he is correct, then knowledge can never be neutral, objective, or ethical, because it is entangled with political, economic, and other external influences (Bloland, 1995). In his book *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (1989), Madan Sarup interprets Foucault's attitude as linking knowledge directly to surveillance, regulation, and discipline. Similarly, Lyotard argues that performativity has become the paramount criterion in the Postmodern world and education. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), he anticipated that the primary purpose of colleges and universities would be to serve the economic system through skill production rather than the pursuit of ideals. In light of this, Rousseau's vision of profoundly good tutors and legislators sits uncomfortably with the relentless development of science and technology, wherein knowledge is primarily technical and judged by its applicability in mass production, the service industry, or the marketplace, which is why it is often divorced from moral, truth, or justice conditions.

5. Revisiting Discourse on Art

5.1 In Rousseau's Defense

Rousseau is frequently associated with polemics against art, which is an unfair categorization given that he was himself a playwright, amateur actor, composer, and man of the theatre. His criticism parallels Sartre's later scrutiny of theatrical self-consciousness. Rousseau (1750/1754, 1970) writes:

[T]he savage lives within himself; the social man, always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others; and it is, so to speak, from their judgement alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence. (p. 222)

Passages such as this indicate that Rousseau condemns a worldview in which people perceive themselves and others as mere spectacles and spectators. He understands society through the *theatrum mundi* metaphor and criticizes the theatre for mirroring and reinforcing a dangerous culture of pretense. His condemnation, therefore, is not of theatre and art *per se*, but of the social condition where people become "aware that they must represent themselves for others" and mistakenly believe that art's purpose is "ornament, display, appearance, distinction" (Marshall, 1986: 88).

In his original work, Rousseau does not advocate for abolishing theatre or art but points to their social inevitability. Precisely because they are unavoidable, he argues they should be practiced as a means of achieving intellectual and spiritual enlightenment, rather than as "a transitory and fruitless emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion producing it" (Rousseau, 1750/1754, 1970: 339). Rousseau's own dramas, *Pygmalion* and *Narcisse*, explore the relationship between artist and art, and the role of creators, beholders, and critics in establishing artistic standards. These works reveal his conceptualization of perfect as opposed to idle art. This ideal of art as a vehicle for genuine expression and enlightenment is arguably more relevant today than ever, living as we do in an era where aesthetic creation has largely become an object of consumerism for impressionable audiences.

5.2 Conceptualization of Perfect Art in *Pygmalion*

In his one-scene lyric drama *Pygmalion*, Rousseau presents art not as something merely external and physical, but as intimate and spiritual. Consequently, the well-known Pygmalion allegory is profoundly shaped by Rousseau's conception of the artist-artwork relationship, which attributes consciousness and selfhood to both creator and creation while granting primacy to the art itself. For instance, upon coming to life, the sculptor Pygmalion's statue, Galatea, declares, "I." Looking at Pygmalion, she says, "This too is I," but upon touching the marble from which she emerged, she objects, "This is not I." This implies that the better part of Pygmalion's own being has become Galatea's spirit. To avoid separation from this source of his existence, the artist must live through his work, as Pygmalion recognizes when he says, "I have given you my whole being; from now on I shall only live through you."

Furthermore, Rousseau uses the play to reject the evils that often accompany art, such as luxury, vanity, and the pursuit of contemporary acclaim. He also challenges the notion of artists as society's wisest members, suggesting that, like philosophers and teachers, they do

not simply reveal meaning but instead facilitate its discovery through interpretation. Thus, the "vain pomp and studied elegance" of statues and masterpieces decorating gardens, halls, and galleries falsely tie art to a superficial feeling of pleasure and opulence (Rousseau, 1750/2021: 15). In reality, transferring life into a work of art is neither entirely pleasurable nor lucrative. Rousseau describes the creative experience as "the tumultuous agitation of a senseless passion" (Rubin, 1985: 519). On one hand, the sculptor cannot remain fully united with Galatea; on the other, the artwork sustains his life, preventing his annihilation. This reflects the paradoxical nature of desire, which contains the urge to be both oneself and the other. Initially, one moves toward the object of desire to merge with it, only to retreat later, since a relationship is possible only when lover and beloved remain distinct (Weber, 1968: 908). This tension is expressed when Pygmalion declares he would gladly die to give Galatea life and live within her, then recoils at the thought, realizing he would then be unable to see or love her.

Pygmalion's address to Galatea evokes Platonic complementary oppositions, where the artist's complement is his own art—the material projection of the self (Rubin, 1985: 518). Moreover, the play suggests that art is the final product of a continuum involving the senses, talent, imagination, and intuition. What makes art perfect rather than idle is its intimate, imaginative, and intuitive origin. Therefore, perfect art is not only subjective but honest. Its character is "the image of the heart's disposition," and it is never subservient to "pleasing principles of current trends and tastes" (Rousseau, 1750/2021: 8).

Contrary to this, the avant-garde and Postmodernism bring the very ideas of individual interpretation and artistic production under scrutiny (Langford, 1992). Even the uniqueness and intuitive origin of the artwork become problematic, especially when contemporary artists sign mass-produced objects and present them as art. This underscores that Postmodern art functions first as a market; it is inseparable from policies of need and demand, auction houses, and the influence of curators and critics. The objecthood of Postmodern art renders it theatrical and therefore idle. Unlike in *Pygmalion*, where the focus is on art as the substance of spirit and beauty and on the creator's desire for posterity rather than instant fame, Postmodern art often seeks immediate attention and publicity. In this sense, the avant-garde has demonstrated that the power of art increasingly depends on "covert strategies of manipulation" (Langford, 1992: 36) and the unstable use of conventional signifiers. In other words, Postmodern art is corrupted by a degree of theatricality beyond what Rousseau might have anticipated. The appreciation of art as shocking or controversial turns many artists into celebrities during their lifetimes, though they are often forgotten just as quickly. This suggests that perfect art is impossible without reference to past standards and posterity, offering

criteria that help critics distinguish "kitsch from high culture" (Mack, 1994: 346). Indeed, much of the modern/postmodern debate hinges on Postmodernism's commingling of high and low culture, whereas Modernism calls for more rigorous standards to differentiate between perfect and idle art.

5.3 Conceptualization of Idle Art in *Narcisse*

In his other one-act play, *Narcisse*, Rousseau warns against the corrupting influence of popular and low culture on metaphorical language and art. The protagonist, Valère, falls in love with a portrait of himself dressed as a woman. The transformation depicted in the portrait mirrors the changes in language and art that Rousseau criticized. He viewed such embellished portraits and ornamental language as misleading appearances born of excessive human desires that surpass what nature deems sufficient. The stability of any epoch depends on human desires being adequately met by nature, which is why the discourse in *Narcisse* is inherently unstable—a condition even more pronounced today. Unlike in *Pygmalion*, the metaphors in this play do not produce unity but cause division, as a distorted image becomes the primary point of reference. The corrupted portrait of Valère is described as "metaphorized" because it depicts someone both like him and entirely different. Were Valère a natural man, he would recognize that the portrait's similarity to him is based on mimesis and would not desire its representation. Here, the allegory is clear: the portrait shows how humanity is constantly misrepresented, since idle art artificially reproduces what is no longer original (O'Neal, 1985: 194). Thus, in *Narcisse*, Rousseau intertwines corrupted metaphorical language, unnatural desires, and idle art to create an unstable discourse. Embellished portraits and ornamental metaphors are idle artistic forms that narrow the gap between perception and representation, compressing them almost to a single point where being and seeming become indistinguishable.

This phenomenon is even more striking in the Postmodern era, which Baudrillard (1983) characterizes primarily in terms of imploded boundaries, hyperreality, and simulacra. This implosion resembles what Rousseau sought to warn against in *Narcisse* and his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. He remarks that he wished he were making predictions rather than reporting experiences when he lamented that "vile and deceiving uniformity reigns in our morals" and that "all minds seem to have been cast in the same mould" (Rousseau, 1750/2021: 9). This observation anticipates the collapse of boundaries between simulation and genuineness, which in the Postmodern context has led to hyperreality. According to Baudrillard (1983), mass media have neutralized reality for us. This process arguably began with corrupted forms of art and language, such as those depicted in *Narcisse*, which masked

reality, and has culminated in social media, which bears no resemblance to genuineness whatsoever. Thus, we are led to ask: if it is difficult in *Narcisse* to return from a state of confusion and false representation to one of natural goodness, spirituality, and ingenuity, what hope do we hold today?

The answer may lie precisely in Rousseau's dramas, discourses, and philosophical insights, which Modernism attempted to incorporate into its own understanding of art, culture, reality, and a relatively stable perception of meaning. Specifically, *Narcisse* lacks Pygmalion's primordial desire to transfer life through contemplation, to know himself profoundly, and to approach God, nature, or the absolute through imagination and intuition. His language does not reflect the depth of human consciousness, nor is it grounded in the concept of positive self-love that yearns for profound comprehension and unity between self and other. The desire *Narcisse* feels for union is based on mimesis—the portrait resembles his own self, corrupted by *amour-propre*, or selfish love. The fact that *Narcisse* is ridiculous while Pygmalion is sublime juxtaposes what is brilliant but short-lived with what is virtuous and enduring. Given this distinction, the maxim for beholders and critics should always be to prefer and acknowledge glory, decency, and virtue, ensuring that artists never feel compelled to lower their genius to the level of their century (Rousseau, 1750/2021).

What distinguishes our time from any other is that responsibility for degraded art has shifted from artists to consumers and observers. Rousseau lamented that individuals of extraordinary talent who pursued the high standards of nature, spirit, and glory were doomed to die in poverty and oblivion (Rousseau, 1750/2021). To prevent such outcomes, beholders, critics, and scholars should reject debasing forms of art—such as regurgitations on canvas, dead animals, or urinals presented as installation art—by refusing to enter the world of popular or low culture through interpretation, comprehension, or justification. This is how intellectuals avoid diminishing their stature as experts and retain the right to perceive such forms through the prism of scandal. In the Derridean sense, scandal is understood as that which can no longer tolerate the opposition between nature and culture. While Rousseau's theory of art implies scandal because imitation is unnatural, Postmodern art is scandalous as it frequently depends on sensation, spectacle, deceitful language, and false appearance. Its primary purpose is to shock and test the limits of societal tolerance, not to enable profound comprehension through transcendence.

6. Conclusion

Exploring Rousseau's discourses on language, education, and art provides a critical foundation for diagnosing the intellectual and cultural dislocations of the Postmodern condition. While Postmodernism's skepticism toward grand narratives and its unveiling of power structures constitute a valuable critical legacy, its trajectory toward pervasive simulacra, the reduction of knowledge to power and performativity, and the aestheticization of reality into market-driven spectacle has engendered a profound crisis of meaning. This discussion has argued that this crisis represents a failure to achieve substantive enlightenment, understood in the Rousseauian sense as the illumination of the spirit through truth and the clear distinction of the fundamental from the superfluous.

The path forward, however, does not entail a simplistic return to Enlightenment axioms. As Rousseau himself critiqued the nominal enlightenment of his own age, we must recognize that his ideals cannot be merely transplanted. Instead, they must be rigorously reconceptualized and fitted to our unique cultural-historical context. The task for contemporary thought is to integrate Rousseau's unwavering commitment to authenticity in language, moral formation in education, and spiritual aspiration in art with a sober acknowledgment of pluralism and the critiques of power advanced by postmodern thought. In this synthesis, late Modernity—or a revitalized critical tradition—can mediate between extremes, preserving the possibility of shared understanding and dialectical progress without resorting to discredited universals.

Ultimately, this is why such a philosophical discussion matters: because proper conceptualization and dialectical engagement are catalysts for social change. Revisiting Rousseau compels us to ask urgent, practical questions. How do we cultivate genuine communication and ethical formation in a digital realm engineered for manipulation and self-promotion? How do we defend the intrinsic value of intellectual and moral growth against the instrumental logic of commodification? The value of Rousseau's insights lies not in providing ready-made answers, but in restoring these as the essential questions we must collectively address. By engaging with them, we can begin to forge a more substantive enlightenment, one capable of grounding individual and collective self-realization amidst the fragments of our age.

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Rezime

Ova diskusija za cilj ima da obnovi interesovanje za Rusoove ideje o jeziku, obrazovanju i umetnosti, naglašavajući njihovu vanvremensku relevantnost u filozofskim raspravama budući da prosvetćenost, kolektivno i individualno samoostvaranje nisu jednokratni događaji, već kontinuirani dijalektički procesi koji zahtevaju stalno preispitivanje i rekreiranje uslova za unapređenje uma i duha. Ruso je smatrao da je i samoj epohi prosvetiteljstva nedostajalo prosvetćenosti, a ova diskusija sugerše da je to itekako slučaj sa postmodernizmom.

Ruso je smatrao da je jezik nastao iz ljudske strasti i prirodne želje za komunikacijom tj. iz najdublje potrebe da se sa drugim podele osećanja i misli. On je takođe verovao da je preduslov svake

komunikacije želja da se međusobno upoznamo i jedni drugima prikažemo baš onakvima kakvi i jesmo. Potpuno suprotno ovome, savremena komunikacija se u značajnoj meri preselila na digitalne platforme, gde su sasvim nestali neverbalni znakovi poput gestova i glas, koji su prema Rusoovom modelu itekako važni za iskreno izražavanje emocija i njihovo pravo razumevanje. Pored ovoga, problem savremene komunikacije je i obmana koja proizilazi iz potrebe da svoj identitet kreiramo u skladu sa određenim trendovima, zanemarujući istinu i iskrenost kao preduslove bilo kakvog razgovora. Postmodernizam je sa sobom doneo nestabilnost u značenju i pluralizam u tumačenju do te mere da se čini da je bilo kakvo zajedničko razumevanje nemoguće.

Kada govori o obrazovanju, Ruso smatra da je njegov glavni cilj stvaranje slobodnog, samostalnog i vrlog pojedinca. Ovo se može postići, smatra filozof, kroz obrazovanje koje u stopu prati prirodni razvoj deteta, kroz iskustveno učenje i učenje putem otkrića a uz pomoć učitelja koji je otelotvorenje onoga što cilj obrazovanja jeste. Savremeno obrazovanje, međutim, raskinulo je vezu sa vrlinom pa je dovedeno u direktnu korelaciju sa bogatstvom i moći. Pored toga, obrazovanje danas priprema učenika za tržište rada, sa akcentom na sticanju onih veština koje mogu dobro doći uslužnim delatnostima, potrebama vojne industrije i multinacionalnih kompanija.

Što se tiče umetnosti, Rusoov stav je prilično kompleksan pa se raznovrsno i tumači. Iako je kritikovao umetnost, Ruso zapravo smatra da je ona za čoveka neophodna i da je neizostavan deo svakog društva, zbog čega mora da bude i lepa i dobra kako bi doprinela moralnom i duhovnom razvoju pojedinca i zajednice. Ruso je odbacio dekadentnu umetnost, umetnost kao simbol luksuza i umetnost vođenu komercijalnim interesima. Međutim, svi ovi oblici umetnosi koje Ruso strogo kritikuje, pa se čini da prezire umetnost uopšte, karakterišu doba u kome živimo. Ona je komercijalizovana, senzacionalistička, neretko vulgarna, pod uticajem savremene tehnologije i relativizovana do mere da je teško uočiti granicu između visoke kulture i kiča.

Dok je modernizam, uz svoje brojne nedostatke i mane, integrisao neke od Rusoovih ideja u svoje okvire, postmodernizam je pokušao da odbaci postavke svojih prethodnika, što je i dovelo do kritične percepcije komunikacije, obrazovanja i umetnosti i omogućilo manipulaciju medijima, transhumanizam i stvaranje kulture *de novo*. Međutim, u svojoj kritici preteča, postmodernizam dokazuje upravo suprotno od onoga čemu teži, a to je da je negacija nasleđa nemoguća, kao što je nemoguće zaustaviti dijalektičke procese jer je sama kritika nužno osvrtna na pređašnje ideje i narative i rasprava sa njima.

Konačno, diskusija sadrži sublimirana znanja autora iz oblasti jezika, obrazovanja i poimanja umetnosti i stvaralaštva, iz čega proizilazi predlog za revitalizacijom nekih od Rusoovih ideala kako bi se predložio povratak stabilnosti, suštini i integritetu kao pravilnom odnosu prema ovim oblastima ljudskog života i delanja jer se jedino tako može ići u susret samoostvarenom pojedincu i realizovanom društvu.

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