

## Has Contemporary Apologetics Misread Postmodernism?

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This conference is about the constant onslaught against the existence of truth in our postmodern culture. Some might even consider this attack on the existence of truth to be warrant enough for rejecting postmodernism. Denying the existence of truth is viewed as one of the greatest threats to the Christian faith. James K. A. Smith describes the situation well in the first line of his book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, saying “Postmodernism tends to be something of a chameleon, portrayed as either monster or savior—either the new form of the enemy or the next best thing to come.”<sup>1</sup> Postmodernism is described this way by individuals occupying what could be thought of as two rival camps: those who believe there is nothing good to be had from this new fad, that we should fight its ideas with better thinking in the hope that eventually postmodernism will lose its grip on our culture and its followers will return to the light (we'll call this the first camp), and those who praise postmodernism and call for its full embrace (respectively, the second camp). Within our own Christian community, we find writers and thinkers, theologians and lay-persons who find their identity in one of the two camps.

Contemporary apologetics, a field which has and continues to influence me considerably, from my own reading, can be characterized predominantly as opposed to this new mood/movement/rebellion/theory/ethos/*zeitgeist* called postmodernism; in other words, contemporary apologetics inhabits the first camp. From the predominant view of contemporary apologetics, postmodernism is responsible for the ideas of deconstruction, pluralism, and relativism, which are nothing more than dangerous ideas threatening to undermine the truth of the Christian faith.

In this paper, I intend to examine briefly the critiques given by contemporary apologetics to combat what it perceives to be the threats from postmodernism. I will examine the questions of universal rationality, the nature of knowledge and language, and the nature of truth. Within each section I intend to provide as accurate a reading of postmodernism as possible within the available space. In these sections I will discuss the views of various Christian theologians and philosophers who occupy what might be considered a middle ground between the two camps. These individuals will not call for a full embrace of all that postmodernism has to offer because they see in postmodernism some of the inherent dangers which contemporary apologetics also sees. Yet at the same time, they see also some significant problems with contemporary apologetics and its practice of clinging to the pillars of modernism. The critique of these modernist pillars by postmodern thinkers, I will argue, is worth our hearing, to the point of changing the way we speak about Christianity and our practices for defending the faith in our culture.

## Construing Postmodernism in Contemporary Apologetics

It may be true that many in the field of contemporary apologetics are sympathetic to some aspects of postmodernism and maybe even endorse doing apologetics from some of the perspectives that I want to examine. However, through my own studies of contemporary apologetics, there is a strong sense that modernist presuppositions provide the foundation from which their arguments are made, specifically, their arguments against postmodernism and even more importantly, the arguments which they use to characterize postmodernism as strongly relativistic.

To say this requires me to highlight some of the modernist presuppositions of contemporary apologetics which I wish to deal with in this paper. Modernism seats the power of understanding within the autonomous, rational individual who, through his use of detached reason and the empirical methods of science allows him to “make universal pronouncements, to be the final arbiter of truth,” making him capable of “establishing absolute foundations of infallible knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Modernism believes that language can describe reality accurately, that our sentences and propositions can directly correspond to reality. Modernism holds that logical reasoning is valid in a universal sense, such that the conclusions of logic are applicable in all times and places for all people. Modernism adheres to this sense of rationality having a universality that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Based on these presuppositions, or in other words, this foundation, contemporary apologetics must critique postmodernism as generally relativistic. There is often not much room for discussion here. In their book, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, Moreland and Craig critique postmodernism in such a way as to cause the reader to dismiss out of hand the questions which postmodernism has raised regarding the presuppositions of modernism.<sup>3</sup> It might be useful to think of contemporary apologetics as consistently arguing against the ideas of postmodernism from a philosophical angle using logical reasoning, by which I mean the conversation stopping practice of pointing out that the claims of postmodernism are “self-referentially incoherent.” It may be correct that according to the logic of non-contradiction the saying “All truth is relative” is an inherently self-defeating statement. However, what are we to do then with the descriptions (rather than prescriptions) postmodernists give of the world which tell us that truth is relative, or at least, not objective in the sense in which modernists will argue?

Here is where I see the conflict. Too often, contemporary apologetics misreads postmodernists as giving prescriptive arguments about the way things should be understood, rather than viewing them for what they are: descriptions about the way they see things in the real world. It is precisely here that I wish to begin a few comparisons.

### Alternate Views of Reality

Contemporary apologetics too often goes wrong by understanding postmodernism to be denying the existence of a universal rationality, or the idea that if everyone was simply intellectually responsible and followed ideas to their logical conclusion, all people would see reality in the same way. Using logical reasoning contemporary apologetics claims that the denial of a universal rationality is self-refuting, for to claim that a universal rationality does not exist through the use of argumentation, a universal rationality must be assumed—simply by the making the argument at all, it is assumed that others will see the logic of the argument and accept it as universally true. Otherwise, why make the argument? As Kevin Vanhoozer explains, “The knowing subject of modernity assumed that reason was universal, impervious to differences of culture and language.”<sup>4</sup>

However, Thomas Kuhn makes a persuasive argument that universal rationality may be more elusive than we actually thought.<sup>5</sup> His work forces us to look beyond the mere refutation of the denial of a universal rationality using logic. By questioning the Enlightenment idea of progress in the sciences, Kuhn proposes that movement within the sciences actually happens through revolutions rather than progressive improvement. Paradigms, for Kuhn, are understood as modes of scientific activity based on certain assumptions which are in competition with one another for the place of dominance in the art of scientific discovery. One paradigm may have great explanatory power for one age, while at another time, a different paradigm reigns. For example, Galileo’s work was not simply built upon by Copernicus, rather Copernicus revolutionized science and replaced Galilean theories. Newtonian physics, though not fully replaced, has been abandoned in some areas of physics for the better applicable Quantum physics—yet even within this newly seated paradigm, questions and anomalies remain, which may eventually cause the replacement of Quantum physics by a better theory with greater explanatory power than can somehow assimilate the knowledge of the old, while at the same time providing answers which the old paradigm could not.

Kuhn’s work not only gives us a history of science through the process of revolutions, it also causes us to question whether our modernist assumptions may not someday be replaced by something entirely different. If Kuhn is right, the future paradigm will provide answers to questions which modernism cannot. The question of universal rationality may be one of them.

Postmodernism calls the existence of a universal rationality into question because it sees certain “incommensurable” views of reality, each with a set of assumptions that cannot be immediately justified. Contemporary apologetics is uncomfortable with those who believe there are alternate views of reality. Often, those individuals are targeted as relativists simply because they admit that alternate views of reality exist. Crystal Downing cautions us that we should not be so quick to label those who hold such views as relativist. She says, “I am not arguing that relativism does not exist. What bothers me (as well as many others) is the indiscriminate use of the word *relativist* to attack someone who is sympathetic to alternate definitions of reality. If redefinition of the truth is relativistic, then Jesus was a relativist.”<sup>6</sup> In his corrections of the Pharisees, Jesus himself showed that there were different views of

reality. Kuhn's work shows that there are incommensurable views of reality based on foundations that do not agree and cannot be brought into complete agreement. Instead, Kuhn argues that they have to be completely replaced, or that a revolution has to occur, usually through the means of persuasive evidence for the validity and explanatory power of an alternate view of reality.

Postmodernists embrace the fact that alternate views of reality exist. However, it does not follow that they argue that anything goes. They are comfortable living with ideas that are incommensurable. William Placher notes, "That need not mean, however, that any opinion is as good as any other or that no one can even compare radically different points of view...[P]eople can still talk with one another and persuade one another with good arguments, even if their differences are more fundamental than those which divide adherents of different scientific paradigms."<sup>7</sup> He goes on to say that, "Good arguments *can* be offered in favor of or against a theory or research program" but the important point to remember is that "those arguments will in turn always rest on assumptions that can be challenged and their results can often not be quantified, so that deciding among theories will always involve factors more like aesthetic judgment than like adding up a column of numbers."<sup>8</sup>

Here Placher is arguing that a universal rationality cannot exist because the assumptions we make about reality are the points by which we judge ideas as more correct, coherent, or viable than others. Such judgments do not come as simply as modernists want to believe. A universal rationality does not merely present itself for our use. Grenz and Franke say that we will never be able to attain a "transcultural intellectual vantage point" with which to invoke a universal rationality.<sup>9</sup> For modernists and contemporary apologetics, the existence of a universal rationality is assumed, and as Placher pointed out, that assumption can be challenged.

### **Provisional Knowledge and Communitarian Language<sup>10</sup>**

Without a universal rationality by which to judge our perceptions of reality as correct or incorrect, how are we to know if we know the truth? If we cannot attain the "transcultural intellectual vantage point," if we do not have a "God's-eye view" as it has been called, how can we be certain of anything? Postmoderns are not uncomfortable with these questions.

Postmodernism argues that our knowledge is far from certain, that is, we cannot know reality as God knows it. Postmodernism also argues that we cannot have epistemic access to the world as it really is outside of our language. These two positions are combined by postmodernists to argue that reality is a social construct. Because our language is based on communities, our vision of reality is constructed from the "language game" that our community plays. This socially constructed vision of reality is thus limited to the ability of our language to capture it, therefore our knowledge of such a reality is necessarily restricted because of the community in which we live and the language which it uses.

Contemporary apologetics argues against the idea that reality is a social construct, holding that not only is the idea necessarily self-defeating (the argument in its favor would be a social construct itself), but so also are the ideas that knowledge is limited and situated (if so, then how can one make such an assured statement?) and language is communitarian (how can this be argued for universally if it is only to be understood through a particular community's use of language?). From this narrow perspective of logical reasoning alone, postmodernism is misread as relativistic.<sup>11</sup>

To understand the postmodern view on knowledge, Jacques Derrida is helpful. Derrida said "there is nothing outside the text." With that statement, deconstruction was born. For him that meant that there is nothing that we can think, say, or believe that does not find its meaning outside of a context. His argument is meant to show that as we are born into our particular social groups, the language of our group is used to form our vision of reality. Our community itself, our history within that community, all that we are taught within that community (sometimes spoken of as a "tradition"), becomes the context in which our vision of reality makes sense. Stanley Grenz and John Franke tell us that "we do not inhabit the 'world-in-itself'; instead we live in a linguistic world of our own making."<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that our vision of reality is not true. It is possible that it could be. However, it is to say that we cannot speak about the truth of our reality without invoking the context of our community, culture, upbringing, education, and the language we use to navigate through life within that community. Such a communitarian view of language implies that our knowledge is truly socially constructed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer says it this way: "Not only do we not have non-linguistic access to the way things are, but the way we speak and think is conditioned by the language in which we dwell."<sup>13</sup>

Let me try to explain from a theological perspective. Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that our knowledge is provisional. Our view of reality as Christians is something which we believe fundamentally to be true. However, he points out that only at the end of the age will we know whether the Christian view is correct or not. Until then, our view is just like any other in our pluralistic age. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe it is true. His argument for the truth of Christianity focuses significantly on the historical nature of God's saving work in the life of Israel's forefathers, in the life of Israel, in the life of Christ, and in the life of the Church. Pannenberg's argument is meant to present the most persuasive interpretation of reality possible, such that Christians can have confidence in their beliefs and also that non-believers might be convinced of the truth of the Christian worldview. Yet he does not find it necessary to argue from the perspective of the same modernist assumptions as does contemporary apologetics. Instead he looks to the future fulfillment of God's work in history to confirm the present truth of our beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

Lesslie Newbigin sums it up well:

The Bible claims to be a true interpretation of a universal history. Since we are not yet at the end of history and since it may yet contain many surprises, we cannot have indubitable certainty. The only possible responses to the claims

that the Bible makes are belief or unbelief. There can be no indubitable proofs. No one has seen God so as to verify the claim that he exists. No one has seen the end of the world so as to be sure of the direction in which we have to go. There is no scientific way of testing the claims and promises that the Bible makes. There is no way of being indubitably certain that this is what history is really about and that gives us the direction of our lives. It must be, as the church has always said, a matter of divine revelation accepted in faith (John 1:18).<sup>15</sup>

## Truth in Question

This brings us to the topic of truth and its nature.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary apologetics will argue that postmodernism does not regard truth to be absolute or available to us in an objective sense. Truth according to most postmodernists is subjective and personal because it is grasped through one's use of language; it is apprehended through the context in which we speak and convey our knowledge. To argue that truth is subjective, contemporary apologetics will point out, is a logical fallacy. Such a statement is an absolute statement which is applicable beyond the single subject who makes the statement. The nature of truth, according to Norman Geisler, is that it is absolute and objective. "Truth is what corresponds to its referent. Truth about reality is what corresponds to the way things really are."<sup>17</sup> R. Scott Smith adds, "Objective truths are true for all people, whether or not anyone accepts them as true, or talks about them as such."<sup>18</sup>

Donald Davidson explains how this view came to predominate.

When there was no clear line between philosophy and science, it was natural for philosophers to claim to be purveyors of the closest thing to truth on offer. Concentration on epistemology, especially when epistemology seemed called on to provide ultimate grounds of justification for knowledge, encouraged the confused idea that philosophy was the place to look for the final and most basic truths on which all other truths, whether of science, morality, or common sense, must rest. Plato's conflation of abstract universals with entities of supreme value reinforced the confusion of truth with the most eminent truths; the confusion is apparent in the view (which Plato ultimately came to question) that the most perfect exemplar of a universal or form is the form itself.<sup>19</sup>

Postmodernists have a problem with this modernist enterprise of thinking about truth as objective or absolute. Davidson continues, "Here we have a deep confusion, a category mistake, which was apparently doomed to flourish. Truth isn't an object, and so it can't be true; truth is a concept and is intelligibly attributed to sentences, utterances, beliefs and propositions, entities which have propositional content."<sup>20</sup> Postmodernists question whether

the modernist agenda of objective/subjective is still worth pursuing. Philip D. Kenneson believes “contemporary Christians would be *better off* without such notions, where “better off” entails having a clearer idea of what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be the church.”<sup>21</sup>

Kenneson sees that the dichotomy between objective and subjective arises because doubt becomes more fundamental than trust. Myron Penner notes, “doubt is the only means for a modern self to guarantee that he or she is not deceived.”<sup>22</sup> Like Penner and Newbign, Kenneson advocates a theory of knowledge based on trust rather than doubt. He argues that we should leave behind the concept of objective truth altogether, therefore escaping from the need to defend his position on truth in light of the modernistic assumptions of contemporary apologetics. He says,

What I am asking you to do is to try on a different model of truth. Within such a model, truth claims are inseparably bound up with human language and are, therefore, inextricably linked to matters of discernment and judgment, which means they are irreducibly social or communal affairs. Within this model, it makes no sense to speak of either objective truth—“truth as viewed from nowhere”—or subjective truth—“truth for me.”<sup>23</sup>

Kenneson points out that “the picture which holds us captive is that something called Truth is ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered or represented in language.”<sup>24</sup> Another way of considering this position is to say that modernists *believe* the truth is out there. Postmodernism is calling into question this very idea. In the new paradigm, Kenneson suggests “beliefs and convictions are not denigrated as second-class knowledge or opinion, but are acknowledged as all we have got and all we have ever had. This means we can stop talking about something being ‘merely’ a belief, a locution which gains its force only when something seemingly more stable is waiting in the wings.”<sup>25</sup> For postmoderns who challenge the assumption that truth is out there, they are calling this position nothing more than a belief. To cite Placher again, “Good arguments *can* be offered in favor of or against a theory or research program...[but] those arguments will in turn always rest on assumptions that can be challenged.”

To revisit some of the points made above regarding language and knowledge, postmodernism is attempting to describe a world in which assumptions are the fundamental starting points for our conceptions of reality. They will admit openly and unapologetically that this fact is true as much for their own views as for others. Our assumptions about reality develop within our own communities or traditions (including the Christian community/tradition) and should be acknowledged as our most basic beliefs about reality. In that light then, how can the beliefs of modernists be any better than the beliefs of postmodernists. The point is to admit that our assumptions really only count for beliefs rather than self-evident, objectively apprehensible truths. At the fundamental level of things,

we believe that what we believe is true. Faith, trust, and reliance become the definitive hallmarks of our epistemology.

### Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World

If truth could be proven objective, contemporary apologetics believed the defeat of pluralism was imminent. Pluralism, or the fact that there are many worldviews which make exclusive claims about the nature of reality, is perceived as threatening to the Christian faith because it makes Christianity merely one vision of reality among many.

Nevertheless, postmodernists promote pluralism because, they argue, we live in a pluralistic world. Postmodernists believe it cannot be otherwise. Because we each conceive of reality based on our assumptions or basic beliefs about the world, it is inevitable that we will all have differing conceptions. What then does this mean for Christianity within a world that is succumbing to deconstruction? If contemporary apologetics should indeed take the time to investigate the questions raised by postmoderns, where does that leave the practice of apologetics within the life of the church? More importantly, where does that leave evangelism, since pluralism tends to make us think that witnessing to our view of reality is useless (given that we all have distinct views of reality)?

William Placher writes

Those who admit they argue out of a tradition—as I have been claiming Christians should—can nevertheless believe in the truth of their claims: truth not just for them but for everyone. They too can believe that everyone really *should* join the conversation. When Christians say that everyone is made in God's image, for instance, and talk about the manifestation of that image in human rationality, they really mean to set out a ground for conversation that applies to all people.<sup>26</sup>

Placher's argument is that even if we admit to the faith-based nature of our assumptions, that fact nevertheless does not preclude such things as evangelism and apologetics of the sort that attempts to persuade others into adopting our view of reality. We believe we have good reasons to adhere to our view of reality. In this way, Christian evangelism, and particularly Christian apologetics remains *faithful* to our trust in the revelation of God in Christ as the truth about reality. Yet, like Pannenberg, we await the fulfillment of God's work and His self-confirmation of our present truth at Christ's return.

In our pluralistic world of traditions and conversations, James K. A. Smith argues that the Christian church,

while recognizing that the gospel is an interpretation of the world and the human condition—perhaps *because* it recognizes this is an interpretation—focuses on the proclamation and the witness of revelation. It does not focus on

an apologetics of demonstration or on a “culture wars” agenda that, using logic as a weapon, seems to think that all Americans should simply see that Christianity is true.<sup>27</sup>

Has contemporary apologetics misread postmodernism? I believe in some ways it has. Foremost, I believe it has been too quick to label postmodernism as ardently relativistic, thus calling for its dismissal. The questions postmodernism raises demand more attention than merely attempting to undo them with logic. For individuals who have taken such time to consider these questions about reality, and especially for the Christian voices I have mentioned throughout this paper, it seems clear to me that if logic were the only means by which to defeat these issues, they would not have expended their intellectual energy investigating these questions and inviting us to join them. Their contributions to the conversation about Christianity in a postmodern world could be of a significantly greater benefit than contemporary apologetics now realizes.

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<sup>1</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Myron B. Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>3</sup> J. P. Moreland & William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003). See especially the chapter on postmodernism (130-153), which prefaces the remainder of the book explaining that it will be an extended critique of postmodernism. The authors briefly touch on many of the complex points of postmodernism without examining them closely. They state more than once that postmodernism is only worth rejecting, which at the very least persuades the reader that the questions which postmodernism raises are not important.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 185. The “others” who agree with her include Paul O’Grady, whom she cites as stating “Relativism is nearly universally regarded as a bogeyman. Hardly any philosopher wants to be called a relativist; nearly everyone is against it—whatever it is. Even those who are regarded by their fellow philosophers as archetypal relativists vigorously deny that they are relativists and indeed launch strong attacks on what they see as relativism.” She also cites Jacques Barzun: “In the realm of ethics, the most blatant absurdity of the day (2000) is wrapped up in the bogey word *Relativism*. Its current misapplication is a serious error because it effects one’s understanding of physical and social science and derails any reasoning about the morals of the day.”

<sup>7</sup> William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Grenz & John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 151.

<sup>10</sup> Questions of epistemology and of linguistics, especially surrounding topics such as these, are worth arguing in books and in entire conferences themselves. Undoubtedly then, my treatment of them here will be narrow and brief.

<sup>11</sup> See R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 96-100; “Christian Postmodernism and the Linguistic Turn” in Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 53-70.

<sup>12</sup> Grenz & Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Vanhoozer, *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 12.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 121-122. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg's three-volume *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1991, 1994, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 54-55.

<sup>16</sup> To remain consistent with the manner of speaking of contemporary apologetics, absolute truth and objective truth are used interchangeably here. See Norman L. Geisler "Truth, Nature of," in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 741-745. Alternatively, there are distinctions made elsewhere in philosophy. See for example, Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Norman L. Geisler, "Truth, Nature of," in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 742. See also Doug Groothuis, "Facing the Challenges of Postmodernism" in *To Everyone an Answer: The Case for the Christian Worldview*, eds. Beckwith, Craig & Moreland, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 238-253; Doug Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated" in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Philip D. Kenneson, "There is no such Thing as Objective Truth, and it's a Good Thing Too" in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, eds. Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 162. See also Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneson, 159.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 117.

<sup>27</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 58.