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# Thoroughly Modern Mannheim and the Postmodern *Weltanschauung*

**Tim Dant**

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Department of Sociology  
Bowland North  
Lancaster University  
Lancaster, LA1 4YT  
[t.dant@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:t.dant@lancaster.ac.uk)  
01524 593184

# Thoroughly Modern Mannheim and the Postmodern *Weltanschauung*

## Abstract

There are a number of features of Mannheim's method for the interpretation of *weltanschauung* that laid the foundations for his later sociology of knowledge and that could be considered as prefiguring the methodological principles of a postmodern world-view. Like postmodernists he stresses the significance of culture, and addresses the role of ideas and meaning in the form of society. His tripartite theory of meaning moves away from a determination of meaning by authorial intentions and towards the indeterminacy of documentary meaning. His theory of 'relationism' follows a similar pattern to the postmodernist concept of 'difference' and ultimately relies on immanent criteria of validity. Despite these continuities with postmodern perspectives I argue that Mannheim cannot be turned into a postmodernist because he seeks a foundation for meaning and its interpretation in historicism. Moreover, while his method analyses material objects and social subjects in the same way, he nonetheless maintains an ontological distinction between objects and subjects that distinguishes his approach from the hyperrealist perspective of postmodernism. If Mannheim cannot be claimed as a postmodernist before its time, his approach to analysing world-views reveals the modernist pretensions of theories that describe a postmodern *weltanschauung* as if the current epoch could be characterised in a unitary and coherent way.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Mannheim's work on the sociology of knowledge was not well received into the English speaking world at the time it was translated (see Simonds 1978: 7-14; Dant 1991: 33-49) and yet it has survived, if rather on the margins of sociology. The provocative idea of the sociology of knowledge, for which he is best remembered, is that knowledge can be understood in terms of its origins in the sociological character of a society; this is the thesis of the social determination of knowledge (Mannheim 1936: 239). What was provocative was partly the shifting of accounting for knowledge from philosophy (traditionally concerned with the form, veracity and methods of knowledge) to sociology (now claiming that the historical and social situation of knowers is prior to their methods in determining the form and content of knowledge). It was also partly to do with the threat of circularity - if the claim of a social foundation for knowledge were accepted, both its utterance and acceptance must themselves be contingent on their social foundations. Nonetheless, the idea of the social determination of knowledge has ensured that his work has received scholarly attention at the hands of generations of sociologists attracted by the arcane and essential appeal of the sociology of knowledge.

Now there seem to be two key reasons why his work has never been welcomed into the centre of modern sociological theory. Firstly, it is concerned primarily with culture; he has little to say on the central topics of sociology such as stratification, social institutions, social pathology or the importance of economics. Even his later work on planning and education remains abstract and at a considerable distance from the practicalities of delivering these applied disciplines. Culture is for Mannheim, art, history but above all ideas including political ideas. Secondly, Mannheim embraced a form of attenuated relativism which he called 'relationism', that seemed to a number of generations of commentators to be untenable either because of its lack of scientific specificity or its consequent political equivocation.

These two reasons have kept Mannheim on the margins the modern era of sociological debate and its various contests since the second world war: functionalism versus interactionism; consensus versus conflict; radical versus conservative; positive versus reflexive; structure versus agency. But his concern with culture and the relativism of knowledge seem precisely why Mannheim's work could have been rehabilitated in the dying years of that modernism. Indeed, there were those who attempted some sort of rehabilitation - writers such Kettler (1967; 1975) , Simonds (1978), Hekman (1986), Longhurst (1989) and Dant (1991; 1995) - by emphasising the historicist, hermeneutic and cultural aspects of his work and the

links with contemporary debates within feminism, the sociology of science as well as structuralist and poststructuralist theories. However, as the perversely grinning beast of postmodernism has raised its plethora of heads, it is interesting that Mannheim's concern with the cultural and his relatively relativist position on truth, method and history has not led to a re-discovery and a re-appraisal such as Simmel (e.g. Frisby 1981) and Benjamin (Buck-Morss 1989; Gilloch 1996)<sup>2</sup> have enjoyed. Some commentators have even attempted to claim these thinkers as postmodernists before the term (e.g. Nägele 1988 and Buci-Glucksmann 1994 with Benjamin, Weinstein and Weinstein 1991 with Simmel).

Mannheim, as I've hinted, might potentially be a candidate for being pulled around the postmodern turn and I will begin by looking at his method of interpretation to show its tendency to suggest the indeterminacy of meaning. Aspects of this method fit with postmodern theory but nonetheless Mannheim is thoroughly modernist and his work is not for turning into postmodernism because, as I will then argue, of its foundation in a historicism that keeps subjects and objects separate. The relativism of Mannheim's version of historicism does link with ideas put forward under the sign of postmodernism and I will look at the connections between postmodern 'difference' and Mannheim's 'relationism'. The project of theorising postmodernity involves articulating a world-view, but finally I will suggest that Mannheim's attempt to tie coherent world-views to particular groups at particular times is dissonant with the postmodern *weltanschauung* that discovers fragmentation and variety across groups and times.

Looking at parallels between postmodern theory and Mannheim's approach to world-views is an opportunity to show that the issues that he was interested in are still pertinent today. My argument is that these connections do not provide a basis for claiming Mannheim as a postmodern thinker. Instead, his approach provides a way of grasping the modernist origins of postmodern theoretical attempts to grasp the ethos of the contemporary epoch.

### **Interpreting the 'document'**

Much of Mannheim's writing on the sociology of culture, the sociology of mind and the sociology of culture is programmatic rather than substantive. This is because his methods derived from an approach in the Germanic cultural sciences, especially Dilthey's 'synthetic' method, "of studying or rather recreating history", that was a reaction to positivist methods based on causes and a systematic explanation (Kecskemeti 1952: 4-5). But in "On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*" (1952a) Mannheim outlines an interpretive method that seems to address substantive matters

and describes three types of meaning - objective, expressive and documentary. Even if cultural objects such as artefacts ideas or actions, do not enter directly into rational discourse as history, philosophy or politics do, all are available to interpretation in each of these different ways. Mannheim's remarks on method have been summarised and commented on before (e.g. Remmling 1975, Loader 1985, Longhurst 1989 and most particularly Simonds 1978) but I want to look again at his method for three reasons. Firstly, his interpretive scheme underlies not only his own later work on knowledge, mind and culture but also most forms of modernist cultural analysis (Simonds 1978: 47). Secondly, he discusses the nature of meaning in cultural objects, and distinguishes between material objects and social action while treating them in equivalent ways, showing that both can provide documentary evidence of the *weltanschauung* that they arise from. Even Simonds's detailed review of his theory of interpretation considers it as a hermeneutic method addressed to texts without considering the sociological or material-cultural ramifications of the method. Thirdly, his approach addressed the possibility of a coherent world-view, grounded in reality, which could be related to a group or an epoch, a possibility that theorists of the postmodern often seem to suggest has passed.

There is something 'unmodern' about treating both social action and material objects in the same way, but the distinction that he maintains between subject and object, human and non-human (Latour 1993: 10-12), is a feature of his underlying modernism. I will look at how he describes his method in relation to the two types of cultural object separately.

### **Interpreting social actions**

Mannheim shows the distinction between the three strata of meaning in social action using the following example: he is walking down the street with a friend; a beggar stands at the corner; his friend gives him alms (Mannheim 1952a: 45). Now the *objective* meaning of this incident is presented by Mannheim as 'assistance' because it does not matter what state of mind either the beggar or the friend have. All one needs to know is that there are beggars and givers within the culture and that this is how they normally act. As Mannheim puts it, all we need to know is the 'system'; objective meaning is interpreted by reference to the typical acts of typical people. In contrast, the level of *expressive* meaning involves identifying the specific intentions of the particular person at that time to communicate, in his example, their 'kindness' as a giver.

It is the third type of meaning, at the *documentary* level, that is most complex. Mannheim suggests that the act might be grasped as an example of 'hypocrisy'. The

cultural object at the level of documentary meaning is a mediator of something that lies behind both the objective and expressive meaning. In the example the act is a document of the ethics which lie behind both this type of act and of this particular act. Mannheim relates the documentary meaning to the specific actor by suggesting that it is to do with his “essential character”, it is a “synoptic appraisal of his personality as a whole” and that it “may take his global orientation as a whole into its purview” (1952a: 47).

An individual giving alms to another individual reproduces a structural relationship between rich and poor. Its public and unembarrassed character indicates a particular world-view or *weltanschauung* which tolerates begging and the giving of alms as an ethical social response to structural poverty. A different world-view would be revealed by the refusal of alms-giving because poverty is to be dealt with, for example, by a socially organised system for redistributing wealth or a method of cultural cleansing that puts beggars in a workhouse.

One of the few direct responses to Mannheim’s concept of documentary meaning in terms of social action comes from ethnomethodology. Harold Garfinkel points out that what Mannheim calls a documentary method is something that many sociological researchers (“lay and professional”) actually do. He abstracts the idea from its context in Mannheim’s writing:

**“The method consists of treating an actual appearance as ‘the document of’, as ‘pointing to’, as ‘standing on behalf of’ a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of ‘what is known’ about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other.” (Garfinkel 1967: 78)**

This way of using the idea of documentary interpretation refers not to the world-view of the epoch or the era but to the common sense understanding that is necessary to make sense of other people’s behaviour. Garfinkel explores the limitations of the documentary method as a technique for sociological analysis and extends the range of methods that incorporate documentary interpretation to include: “...‘the method of understanding’, ‘sympathetic understanding’, ‘method of insight’, method of intuition’, ‘interpretive method’, ‘clinical method’, ‘emphatic method’ and so on.” (Garfinkel 1967: 95n). Garfinkel acutely points to the documentary method as characteristic of interpretive methods. Unfortunately he does not discuss objective meaning in relation

to his general extension of Mannheim's stratum of documentary meaning. The analysis of objective meaning, of understanding actions in terms of how beggars and givers within the culture normally act, is close to the aim of ethnomethodology to study "practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study" (Garfinkel 1967: 1).

What the work of ethnomethodology shows is that objective meaning is far more complex than Mannheim implied and its study is far more difficult, methodologically, than he made it appear. For Mannheim, analysing objective meaning requires a general understanding of the culture - a member's common sense understanding of what things usually mean and how people usually act. This is the taken-for-granted capacity of members to engage with their setting that constitutes for ethnomethodology precisely what requires detailed and painstaking explication.

Ethnomethodology's critique of interpretive methods in sociology draws attention to a circularity in Mannheim's account of the strata of meaning. The world-view that documentary interpretation addresses is at least contributory to the common sense that is necessary for interpreting objective meaning - which is precisely why the particular social act can give insight into world-view. There is then a chicken and egg problem with Mannheim's levels of interpretation; can the interpretation of objective meaning begin without some prior understanding of at least a proto-world-view? It is this critique from ethnomethodology that Bauman claims gave postmodern sociology its "original boost" in exposing the "irreparable underdetermination of social reality" (Bauman 1992: 40). Mannheim treats the objective and expressive levels of meaning as determinate, as being vulnerable to interpretation by the application of a straightforward method. This presumption of a simple determination of meaning is what Garfinkel reacts to. But by maintaining three levels of meaning, in which the documentary level of meaning lies behind and potentially undermines the other two, Mannheim's method introduces an indeterminacy or at least an historically variable quality to the meaning of social action.

### **Interpreting objects**

In a move that prefigures recent sociological interest in material culture (Baudrillard 1996; Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987), Mannheim also applies his interpretive 'strata of meaning' to material cultural objects. First of all he distinguishes three types of objects: simple objects such as a block of stone in which no human action has invested meaning; objects which mediate meaning directly such as a sculpture; and objects such as books which are vehicles for another medium such as written

language. Each of these types of objects may carry the three strata of meaning but in different ways.

Natural objects have an objective meaning related to their concrete form in space and time but they may acquire expressive and documentary meaning by being appropriated as cultural objects - Mannheim gives the example of treating the whole of Nature as a documentation of God. Mediating objects have been made as vehicles of meaning and will always have all three strata of meaning present. Simply hewing off a block of stone does not give it meaning - it is the psychic acts of individuals who see or create objects that endows them with meaning and inserts them into culture.

**“The marble of a statue, for instance, merely actualizes a meaning (the work of art as such), and the ‘beauty’ of the statue is not one of the properties of the physical object marble, but belongs to an altogether different plane.”  
(Mannheim 1952a: 44)**

For Mannheim, objective meaning is not the same as the scientific or sense-psychological apprehension of an object as something that can be seen, touched, measured and so on. Meaning derives from the place of an object in a culture; a book is an object but has a very different objective meaning for those who can read and make sense of it. A material thing cannot offer its own account, as could the beggar or the friend, but it is a vehicle for ‘objective meaning’ in terms of its physical content. Mannheim describes how a painting’s representational form is made up of things like narrative, the arrangement of figures, action, lighting, colour, pattern and perspective. These objective features can be ascertained merely by looking but without inquiring about the artist or his intentions (Mannheim 1952a: 49).

Mannheim appeals to an ‘aesthetic conception’ that allows us to recognise objective meaning in art-works simply through sufficient familiarity with the development of a cultural form such as painting. Objective meaning is the “the least equivocal” stratum and is accessible regardless of its “cultural remoteness” and the “intellectual differences” between the creator and interpreter (1952a: 51). Mannheim claims that there is an aesthetic visual universe which is supra-historic, ubiquitous, and hence, objective. Within this global universe there are historical and cultural visual universes but their commensurability makes the objective meaning of art-works from foreign cultures accessible.

Expressive meaning refers to the meaning intended by the producer or creator of an object. The demarcation between objective and expressive meaning is “fluid” and

Mannheim recognises the potential for differences between these two strata of interpretation; the biblical scenes of early paintings expressed only religious exaltation whereas the same events and figures in later paintings acquired an 'erotic' expressive meaning. The solution seems to give priority to expressive meaning by treating the meaning intended by the artist as explaining differences between similar objects that appear to have the same objective meaning. However, unlike some interpretive methods (e.g. Hirsch 1967) Mannheim is taking expressive meaning as only one stratum of meaning and certainly not the locus of valid meaning. Expressive meaning links the creating subject's psyche to meaning, specifying the unique quality of meaning that is of this person at this time. However, expressive meaning cannot exist without the objective stratum and vice versa - Mannheim talks of the double significative function of the medium.

Although based on the creator's intentions, expressive meaning does not depend on the creator's own account of their work; the interpreter understands the work by reconstructing the intentions behind its production from the context in which it was produced, including other works by the same creator. Mannheim proposes that like the historian we can acquaint ourselves with the 'mental climate' in which the work was uttered and thereby "secure the background against which the specific intent of the work, the unique contribution of the individual artist, will stand out in sharp detail" (Mannheim 1952a: 55).

The approach to interpreting documentary meaning is quite different since it is not related to the specific object and its typical meaning or directly to the conscious intentions of its producer. Documentary meaning is an "unconscious by-product" of material cultural production which is:

**"...not a matter of a temporal process in which certain experiences become actualized, but of the character, the essential nature, the 'ethos' of the subject which manifests itself in artistic creation." (Mannheim 1952a: 55)**

Analysing documentary meaning involves an interpretive effort directed at the "essential nature, the 'ethos'" of an object that derives from the creator's "personality and outlook, not in the psychological sense but in the cultural sense" (Mannheim 1952a: 56). 'Ethos' derives from the late Latin word for habit and refers to the distinctive character, the essential nature, the spirit not of an individual but a people or a culture. The cultural subject of documentary meaning is constituted by the residue in him or her from engagement with culture and is not reducible either to the

intentionality of the creator or to the modern individual, bounded by the body and the mind. The analysis of documentary meaning aims at identifying the values and concerns of a culture that give rise to an object. Both the object and the creator are vehicles for the cultural ethos but their particularity, their specific intentions or form, are not the issue for documentary analysis.

The paradoxical nature of documentary meaning is that it can be interpreted from individual works or even fragments. Unlike expressive meaning which requires some knowledge of the artist's life and work, documentary interpretation requires the interpreter to connect cultural objects that share the same documentary meaning. Some grasp of the objective meaning is necessary for documentary understanding, but there does not seem to be any requirement that the expressive level of meaning be analysed first. The documentary meaning of a specific work refers to the *weltanschauung* or world-view that lies behind it, that the creator shares with others in the culture even though they may not be aware of it. The features addressed by the interpreter are documentary (i.e. material and concrete) evidence of a sphere of meaning bigger either than the taken-for-granted meaning or the producer's intentions. The analysis of documentary meaning depends not on the creator's intentions but on the intentionality of the interpreter who attempts to grasp the *weltanschauung* which lies behind the object.

A similar attempt to grasp the cultural meaning of material objects that does not depend on their taken-for-granted meaning or the creator's intentions, is undertaken by another cultural analyst, Roland Barthes, whose mythological level of signification is rather like Mannheim's documentary level of meaning in material culture<sup>3</sup>. For example, Barthes analyses the mythical function of objects such as cars that are "consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object" (he is writing about the 'new' Citroën DS - Barthes 1972: 88-91). Barthes shows no interest in intentional or expressive meaning but when he comes to analyse the mythological meaning of something like the Citroën DS he identifies those signifiers, those fragments of the object, that resonate at the mythological level such as the glass-work ("...vast walls of air and space, with the curvature, the spread and the brilliance of soap bubbles..." Barthes 1972: 89). Mannheim notes that while expressive meaning is tied up with the unity of objective meaning, documentary meaning "may be inherent in detachable partial aspects" (Mannheim 1952a: 57) and is not tied to any single spatial form or to the objective relationships between them. Documentary meaning in a series of fragments (such as

those in Barthes collections in Mythologies and The Eiffel Tower) may describe a particular world-view, such as the ethos of late western capitalism.

Both Barthes and Mannheim are interested in the analysis of cultural objects as vehicles that tell us about the culture from which they emerge. Just as Mannheim establishes an interpretive system with his three strata of meaning, Barthes sets out in his article "Myth Today" (1973: 109-159) and later in The Elements of Semiology, a system for analysing levels of meaning; both are interested in moving from the specific instance to the larger, abstract realm of meaning. For Mannheim this is the world-view or *weltanschauung*, for Barthes this is the mythological system of the society in which he lives.

There are important differences - for example, Barthes takes a much broader and more complex view than Mannheim of what constitutes a sign<sup>4</sup> - but both are engaged in a modernist project of attempting to grasp the ethos of their era by interpreting cultural objects. Mannheim never abandons this attempt but refines it and attempts to establish systems by which such understanding can be put to use through education and planning. In contrast, Barthes recognises the problem of the indeterminacy of meaning (the endless chain of signification) and later abandons any attempt to identify a unitary mythological system that might be equivalent to a *weltanschauung*. Unlike Barthes, Mannheim addressed the ontological basis for his attempt to understand the form of culture and much of his work was addressed to establishing a foundation for his approach. While Barthes went on to sow the seeds of postmodern theory, Mannheim attempted to clear a ground in which to establish his mode of analysis.

### **Documentary meaning and world-view**

Mannheim sees documentary meaning as "an identical, homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning" (1952a: 57). The 'ethos', world-view or *weltanschauung*, is an ideal essence, the perspective of an historico-cultural, "pure subject". In an extensive footnote (1952a 59n) Mannheim shows that he is unsure of the ontological status of the historico-cultural subject which gives rise to documentary meaning. It is a social group, not an individual, but he distinguishes it from empirically defined sociological categories such as class or race (it is not "an existing empirical group" - 1952a: 59).

Because expressive and objective meaning are tied to empirically constituted entities, objects and subjects, they have an historical consistency that *weltanschauung*, documentary interpretation and the cultural subject do not:

**“Unlike the two other types of interpretation, documentary interpretation has the peculiarity that it must be performed anew in each period, and that any single interpretation is profoundly influenced by the location within the historical stream from which the interpreter attempts to reconstruct the spirit of a past epoch.” (Mannheim 1952a: 61)**

Mannheim has organised his strata of meaning around a subject / object distinction; the social act or the material artefact is a cultural object which human subjects produce. There is an *objective meaning* which is to do with what the object means in the culture (regardless of when and by whom it was produced). There is a subjective level of *expressive meaning* that focuses on the object as revealing the subject's intentions as the particular creator of the object. And then there is the meaning associated with a historico-social subject, the qualities which endure in the particular subject over time and many different acts - *documentary meaning*. This underlying historical-subjectivity is not immediately available-to-consciousness for the producing subject but documentary meaning can be analysed through the intentionality of an interpreting subject.

Mannheim makes a distinction between the reality of cultural objects, expressing subjects and sociologically defined groups on the one hand and the quasi-reality of historico-cultural subjects and world-views on the other. The key concepts of documentary meaning and world-view in his interpretive method are quasi-real in that they do not have precise correlates in the realm of empirical enquiry - they cannot be tied down specifically to time and place. Nonetheless, neither is super-real, neither bears down determinately on the lives of men and women as would a god, or transcendent spirit of history. The document and the *weltanschauung* move to the very limits of his modernist distinction between objects and subjects.

The quasi-reality of the world-view renders it irreducible to a systematic method and it cannot be judged according to a universal standard - as such it is indeterminate. The result is that there are likely to be equally compelling interpretations of the same world-view that are in competition. Mannheim's solution is that we judge between them by asking which is most adequate, that is “which one shows the greatest richness, the greatest substantial affinity with the object” (1952a: 62). This rather vague and immanent criterion of adequacy is also used to modify interpretations being handed down from one generation of interpreters to another. Mannheim suggests that the nearer “in essence” the era from which interpretation takes place to

the era being studied, the closer the affinity and therefore the likelihood of the interpretation prevailing as the most comprehensive.

Documentary meaning is dependent on the historical position of the interpreting subject who “has an essential bearing on the content of knowledge, and some aspects of the object to be interpreted are accessible only to certain types of mind” (1952a: 61). As an example, Mannheim points to the way different of our parents’ characteristics will become more accessible and relevant than others as we ourselves age. Here the method of documentary interpretation becomes more mundane and there is a sense that we all do it all the time. We identify actions and objects as indicative of an underlying way of being in the world so, for example, we might note that the use of a vulgarity is being tolerated in a social context where a few decades earlier it would have brought indignation and censure.

There are features of Mannheim’s method which hint at a continuity with the postmodern. He does put culture centre stage, even prioritising the visual over text and social action. In his tripartite system, meaning is always indeterminate, never finally reducible to any one stratum. The requirement that interpretation is always subject to review in each new age resists any absolute or final analysis. He is clearly on the margins of modernist thinking as he decentres authorial intention and renders interpretation a reflexive and immanent enterprise reliant on who is doing the interpreting.

However, three things make Mannheim’s interpretive method thoroughly modern. Firstly, he maintains a distinction between human subject and material object. The way that he treats material objects as vehicles of meaning in the same way as social action is most unusual and somewhat of a departure for modernist thought. But he does make a clear demarcation and moreover prioritises ‘sensual’ media over textual or signficatory media. As the discussion of objective meaning has shown, meaning is always dependent on the active presence of subjects (both the creating subject and the interpreting subject). What is more, the vehicles of meaning at all three levels are always ‘objects’ in that they are external to subjects and available through the senses to anyone who takes notice, be they social acts, sculptures or written texts.

Secondly, as I have argued, the historico-cultural subject that is constituted as the holder of a world-view is an idealist, essential category, that even shorn of any transcendental aspirations, suggests a coherent and unified perspective that can be identified as characteristic of a group or an age or a style of thought. As we shall see, the possibility of such coherence is rejected in postmodernist thought.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Mannheim's historicism provides a foundation, in which the conceptual categories he develops are based. It is to this historicism that I will now turn.

### **Historicism and *Weltanschauung***

For Mannheim *weltanschauung* is interpretable because of its continuity with history - there is a logic to it that can be unravelled. His theory of historicism argues that successive historical world-views do not simply start again but are derived from that which went before. While there is something new that characterises the world-view of an age, there is also an incorporation of previous understanding. He writes of philosophies:

**“... being constantly constructed anew from still *more comprehensive new centres* in such a way that the old insights are incorporated in the new and invested with new significance.” (Mannheim 1952a: 90, emphasis in original)**

The notion of *weltanschauung* or world-view proposes an underlying coherent perspective characteristic of a social group during an historical period. There is a logic not dissimilar to psychoanalysis at work here in that the contents of past experience have a bearing on current actions and perceptions; the *weltanschauung* is something like the psyche of a society. Mannheim links the tasks of interpreting cultures to writing biographies (1952a: 73-74) and later in Ideology and Utopia points out the limitations of focusing on individual motivations in a life-history or psychoanalytic approach to the study of knowledge (Mannheim 1936: 25). The problem is to integrate particular and individual perspectives with all others to build up a picture of the whole by using a systematic method able to withstand positivist scrutiny.

The sort of cultural understanding Mannheim proposes is only possible once the grip of religion and mysticism has receded. Though his talk of spirit and totality suggest a link with Hegel he does not invoke a spirit of history, or of any transcendent force. His inspiration comes from Dilthey's idealism, modified under Kant's shadow. History is construed in terms of the 'epoch'; a segment of historical time equivalent to the biography of a person. And the '*weltanschauung*' is indeed the outlook of a culture as if it were a single human being.

There is a thorough-going humanism in Mannheim's conception of *weltanschauung*. Knowledge is the contents of thought and the structures of thinking of an era realised

through the collective actions and interactions of the people who live through it. The existence and operation of a world-view is essentially cognitive and bears on the character of the epoch as if the society or culture were a sentient being. Mannheim is clear that his reductionism to society as analogous to a human is not as crude as to envisage a 'group mind' (1936: 2, 44, 241) or 'collective thinking'. Nonetheless, the cultural coherence suggested by the idea of a 'world-view' presents methodological problems for sociology in identifying the boundaries of groups who participate in this shared perspective (classes, generations, nation states, religious groups) and caused Mannheim some difficulties when he came to spell out the features of the sociology of knowledge in Ideology and Utopia.

There is some similarity between Mannheim's project and that of postmodern theory; spelling out the characteristics of the postmodern is to point to the emergence of an epoch in which people share a perspective that informs both the way they grasp what is going on and the way they act. But the big difference is that the postmodern perspective is multi-faceted and seemingly devoid of coherence. As Lyotard puts it "[e]clecticism is the degree zero of contemporary culture" (1992: 17). The account of postmodernity is inspired by the attempt to identify a unitary world view, either a development of the modern or a shift to a new perspective. But what is discovered is a sharing of an anti-world view; the global outlook is no more than a myriad of local outlooks, each continually cycling through a series of competing perspectives. Its only unity lies in the tolerance of diversity and through a discovery of the failure of the project of modernity; "the discovery of a lack of reality in reality - a discovery linked to the invention of other realities" (Lyotard 1992: 19).

For Lyotard the lack of reality leads to an uncovering of the sublime. If the historical subject of Mannheim's modern epoch is a cogniting subject making sense of the world, Lyotard discovers in the heart of the historical subject of his, postmodern, era the equivocal emotions of a mixture of pleasure and pain which lead not to distinct categories but to an awareness of the sublime. This awareness he contrasts with the modernist discernment of 'taste' which he describes as "an accord between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept" (1992: 19).

This is precisely Mannheim's modernist project; to systematically link objects to concepts is the task of interpreting the *weltanschauung*, of grasping world-views. For Lyotard any such project founders when confronted with the postmodern era because:

**“We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what it is) but not the capacity to show an example of it. We can conceive of the absolutely great, the absolutely powerful; but any presentation of an object - which would be to ‘display’ that absolute greatness or absolute power - appears sadly lacking to us. These ideas, for which there is no possible presentation and which therefore provide no knowledge of reality (experience) also prohibit the free accord of the faculties that produces the feeling of the beautiful.” (Lyotard 1992: 20)**

Ironically Mannheim’s modernist method presages the postmodern era described by Lyotard because he fails to bring forth those objects that might display ‘ideology’ or ‘utopia’, ‘conservatism’ or ‘generations’. The lack of empirical grounding for Mannheim’s theoretical work flaws his whole enterprise; it is never clear how any world-view or perspective is empirically constituted or to whom, precisely, it can be imputed. In his most detailed historical analysis of a world-view, that on conservative thought (Mannheim 1953) its contents, its historical precursors, its philosophical status, its relationship with styles of thought in other countries are discussed, but it is never clear who can be identified as adopting conservatism, either as named individuals or sociologically described groups or what cultural objects document it.

### **Difference and relationism**

Mannheim wishes to use historicism to provide a foundation for the interpretation of world-views but his resistance to any essentialist reduction leads him towards relativism. In this section I want to argue that his version of relativism, ‘relationism’ gets close to the concept of ‘difference’ within postmodern thought. Before exploring the development of ‘relationism’ I will look briefly at ‘difference’ in postmodern theorising.

Charles Lemert argues that the contribution of postmodernism is in recognising the “the ironic centrality of differences in a decentred world” (Lemert 1992: 42). He traces the concept of ‘difference’ through its origins in structuralism and its refinement by the poststructuralists, particularly Derrida. To illustrate the impact of taking difference seriously, he explores an example from anthropology; versions of the historical events surrounding Captain Cook’s entry into the reality and myth of Hawaiian lives. The myths and rituals of the Hawaiian people provide one version, a second is provided by a European anthropologist’s ethnography that gives an outsider’s account of the connection between the local myths and historical events. The third version is an anthropological re-writing of the ethnography, which accounts for the

events, the myths and the earlier ethnography. Each version constitutes a text from a different perspective on the same historical events. Lemert argues that the third and most recent text takes on the postmodern quality of recognising the perspective of the Other. The third version rejects the white European centre of the original ethnography while not simply adopting the 'native' perspective of the Hawaiian myths. In so doing this third text takes recognises the difference of perspectives and the bearing that it has on generating a text.

In a second example Lemert shows how the feminist debate around the claims for a woman's standpoint or perspective led to the concept of 'fractured identities' which, for all the problems that it causes, recognises the significance of difference in perspective of different social locations. The perspective of the individual is not a product of one locational feature such as gender, but is modified and varied according to a series of other features which contribute to identity and specify social location (e.g. class, race, age). Every individual's perspective is shared with a range of others each of whose individual identity is derived from their participation in a number of perspectival positions. As Lemert says of this conception of individual identities as fractured; "It stands today as one of the most compelling advances in the complex, yet short, history of the concept of difference" (Lemert 1992: 40). The recognition in anthropology and feminism of competing perspectival positions as existing in relation to each other has much in common with Mannheim's project of the sociology of knowledge and the "non-evaluative total conception of ideology" (1936: 71) that he developed from interpretation of world-views.

What Lemert identifies as distinctly postmodern is the recognition of 'difference' in perspectives which leads to explications of social situations and events that are more informed by their own historical and social location. This retreat from attempts to found a single, true, method, comes with the Derridean "critique of the Enlightenment" (Lemert 1992: 35). Mannheim's own account of the relationship between post-enlightenment epistemology, idealist logic, historico-philosophy and phenomenology amounted to a critique of the Enlightenment which also tried to avoid establishing any essentialist or central perspective. His historicism and the proposal of the sociology of knowledge blur the importance of 'truth' as the criterion for understanding knowledge but firmly resist any return to romanticism or mysticism.

Mannheim mounts this critique from the theoretical basis of his particular version of historicism. Anticipating the charge of relativism (Mannheim 1952b: 91) he points out that the formal categories of Reason, which lie at the centre of enlightenment thought, are not eternally the same but undergo a process of alteration of meaning

that is the effect of history. There can be no appeal to a supra-temporal validity because there is no rigid relationship between form and content in human affairs - form is subject to historical variation just as is content.

He distinguishes human affairs of course from the more fixed relationship between form and content in the material world. Science may be able to describe the form of the material world and expect its formal description, theory, to survive the transformation of material world<sup>5</sup>. But the human sciences are subject to the effects of history because theory itself is penetrated by social life. Mannheim is rejecting the philosophical claim of *a priori* reasoning because he argues that there can be no thought prior to social existence, to history. It is the job of historicism to “point out what extra-philosophical and pre-philosophical attitudes of life and what dominant socio-cultural realities determine the choice of this or that set of axioms” and “to trace the connection between fact and value” (Mannheim 1952b: 94). What Mannheim’s historicism rejects, as do contemporary postmodern theories, is perspectives founded in reason and in which “everything is placed in the rigid alternative of true or false” (Mannheim 1952b:100).

Now while Mannheim is keen to distinguish his perspective both from one based on enlightened reason and from one that is based on an ideal perspective (that of God or the spirit of history) he needs to ground his perspective somewhere to prevent it dissolving into a relativism in which everything will have equal value. In the essay on “Historicism” Mannheim finds this grounding in the socio-historical location of the knowing subject:

**“... it becomes possible to show and assess the historico-philosophical (sociological) *positional determination (Standortgebundenheit)* of every item of historical knowledge (a consequence of which is that the historical picture of the past changes with every epoch).” (Mannheim 1952b: 103)**

Positional determination is a consequence of the circular link between knowledge and action; to know the world one must live in it; one’s knowledge must be affected by the world if it is to accord with it; one’s knowledge must be able to affect the world if there is to be any point in having knowledge; the point of knowledge is to be able to live in the world. As Mannheim chases this epistemological circle, only slowed by the positionality of the knower, he recognises that it affects not only concrete knowledge but also epistemology - including his own account of the process of knowledge. Although this ‘positional determination’ account of historical knowledge seems to lead

towards “the relativity of all historical knowledge” Mannheim argues that the values by which history must be judged arise “organically” out of the processes they are being used to judge.

There are two dimensions to relativism here, the first is that historical knowledge is relative to the historical period in which it arises, the second that historical knowledge is relative to other, competing, accounts from the same period. Mannheim accepts the first type of relativism which is why historical knowledge has to change with each epoch, but he rejects the second type of relativism which he recognises would fall to the classic anti-relativist argument that “... the assertion of relativity itself claims absolute validity and hence by its very form presupposes a principle which its manifest content rejects” (Mannheim 1952b: 130).

The solution to the classic dilemma of relativism that Mannheim proposed was the methodological principle of ‘relationism’ which asserts that the perspectival nature of all accounts undermines their absolute claims and puts them into relation with each other:

**“As soon as I identify a view which sets itself up as absolute, as representing merely a given angle of vision, I neutralize its partial nature in a certain sense.”  
(Mannheim: 1936: 271)**

Rather than rejecting as untrue or inaccurate one or more of competing perspectives, relationism suggests that they can be neutralised in their partiality and then fitted together to form a broader account which recognises the viability of competing perspectives. This is what happens with an ethnography that accounts for the emergence of the ‘other’ and a feminism that recognises a multiplicity of ‘fractured identities’, none of which alone accounts for the knowledge or experience of women. The broader, multi-perspectival account does not reduce to relativism because the quality of arguments is not assumed to be equivalent. Instead each is recognised and evaluated in its context of emergence and not judged by an absolute standard. Relationism offers an epistemology based on immanence; there is no standard of truth which endures regardless of history. Each version of the world must be judged by standards appropriate to the context of its emergence.

Mannheim develops the physical and optical metaphor of perspectivism to explain what he means by relationism in the sociology of knowledge:

**“Just as the fact that every measurement in space hinges upon the nature of light does not mean that our measurements are arbitrary, but merely that they are only valid in relation to the nature of light, so in the same way not relativism in the sense of arbitrariness but *relationism* applies to our discussions.” (Mannheim 1936: 254)**

Of course these methodological principles do not amount to a method of showing how this process of establishing the relation between perspectives is achieved. Mannheim’s historicism uses the very process of historical change as “... the Archimedean lever...” (Mannheim 1952b: 133) to articulate the relation between world-view and society. Like postmodern theories, Mannheim’s method is characterised by the refusal of a single system of reason, an essential method but unlike postmodernism it seeks a foundation in the historicist dynamic of change.

To apply Mannheim’s historicist foundationalism to Lemert’s examples of difference would involve pointing out that the most comprehensive and incorporating perspective is the most recent. Both the third version of Captain Cook in Hawaii and the concept of fractured identity emerged as modifications of earlier, more limited perspectives with which they compete. The validity of each perspective is relational to the social and historical location in which it emerged, but the later theorising of events can incorporate an account of the relation of earlier perspectives to their context of emergence. In this way the most recent, synthetic perspective can “show the greatest substantial affinity with the object” (Mannheim 1952a: 62).

### **The view from postmodernity**

Theories of the postmodern take postmodernity itself to be a world-view, an outlook that is characteristic of an era. It is identified as a perspective, either one that characterises the direction and process of society (sometimes distinguished as late or high modernity), or one that characterises the outlook of certain social commentators or theorists - i.e. the interpreters who have attempted to identify the documentary meaning underlying the contemporary era. Now the distinguishing feature of the postmodern *weltanschauung* is the loss of a unified and coherent world-view in contemporary culture<sup>6</sup>. This means that the very possibility of undertaking the sort of cultural analysis that Mannheim proposed is put in jeopardy from the beginning. Objective and expressive meaning may be identifiable and open to interpretation but the move to articulate the world-view or ethos behind them is confounded by a confusion or at least a plurality of world-views. This may be

summed up in the breakdown of grand narratives and their replacement by the pragmatic, contingent and transient local narratives oriented to performativity that Lyotard describes (1984: 44). The specific context dependent interpretations of objective and expressive meaning can be analysed in terms of local narratives but the comprehensive interpretation of world-view is dependent on a rather grander, more encompassing narrative.

In one of the endless attempts to grasp the key features of a postmodern world, Ihab Hassan focuses on two categories of thinking, *indeterminacies* and *immanences*. These are the concepts by which postmodern theory catches the ethos of the age. The group of indeterminacies emphasises the lack of unity and coherence of the postmodern world, the lack of a causal history, the absence of goals or consensus about the good life; “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation”. The group of immanences points to the tendency of the postmodern mind to act upon itself to create its own environment: “diffusion, dissemination, pulsion, interplay, communication, interdependence” (Hassan 1993:153). Just how accurately Hassan has represented the postmodern *weltanschauung* is not here at issue; what is interesting is that by a series of interpretive moves he has attempted to discover what the ethos behind postmodern culture is; he, like many others, has utilised the modernist method of documentary interpretation.

What makes Mannheim so thoroughly modern is his desire to retain the category of the real. It is there in his account of the interpretation of world-views but it underlies all his later work. There is, his approach presumes, the possibility of recovering the real, the specific, the singular which constitutes a world-view, a *weltanschauung*, through interpretation. The ethos which underlies cultural objects such that they can be read as documents, is, for Mannheim knowable. The same desire to work back from the text to its underlying meaning is there in all interpretive methods, including, as I’ve argued, the modernist optimism of Barthes’s early semiology<sup>7</sup>.

What distinguishes the postmodern analysis of *weltanschauung* from the modernist, is that the real becomes detached from history as the process of representation gives way to that of simulation. As Baudrillard puts it, there is a “precession of simulacra”; that which simulation resembles is nothing other than a simulation. There are only models that precede models, there is no concrete form of the real which provides the grounding in time and space for the original meaning:

**“The transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing marks a decisive turning point. The first reflects a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates the era of simulacra and of simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgement to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance.” (Baudrillard 1994: 6)**

The emergence of the sociology of knowledge as Mannheim understood it, was made possible by the collapse of religion in cohering a unitary world-view. Mannheim was optimistic that total ideology, the concept that supplanted world-view in his developing sociology of knowledge, could be rendered sensible to the sociology of knowledge within its relationist limits. The operation of an interpretive method could identify the processes by which a concentration of the competing ideas of different groups could be grasped.

This is precisely what Baudrillard and Lyotard in different ways reject as impossible in the period of postmodernity. No longer, they argue, can the interpretation of representation aspire to uncovering a coherent world-view. The stratum of objective meaning disappears with the stable distinction between the real and representation<sup>8</sup>. The level of expressive meaning which depends on the coherence of intention becomes subverted by the play of irony. This is the realm of the hyperreal. These ways of interpreting cultural objects no longer work in the postmodern world of the sublime and the simulacra. But the interpretation of documentary meaning and the attempt to grasp the *weltanschauung* does not disappear because of course it is precisely the means that Baudrillard uses to analyse the postmodern. He presents a series of fragments of culture (television verité, the death of American presidents, the state of ethology) as documents of the fundamentally incoherent and disunited world-view of postmodern society. Perhaps most important though is that the historical stability of *weltanschauung* which enabled Mannheim to find a foundation for his analyses has disappeared. The fragmentation of subject identities, the break-up of grand narratives and the hyperreal form of culture mean that establishing the relation between a world-view and a socio-historic location becomes even more difficult than it was for Mannheim.

## Conclusions

I have argued that with his perspectivism, his tripartite analysis of meaning, the theory of relationism and the equivalent treatment of human subjects and material objects, Mannheim anticipated key features of the postmodern perspective. But the conceptual tools that postmodernism uses to grasp its own world-view (eclecticism, the sublime, difference, indeterminacy, the precession of simulacra) do not fit with Mannheim's attempt to generate coherent interpretations. At the same time as he is kicking away the epistemological foundations of enlightenment thought, it is Mannheim's continued differentiation between subject and object and his search for a foundation in historicism that keeps him thoroughly modern. Historicism for Mannheim means that in the last instance interpretation cannot transcend the dynamic of historical change to determine meaning. Relationism provides Mannheim with an epistemological foundation such that meaning is treated as determined - within the limits of its relation to an historical epoch.

I have not argued that Mannheim was a postmodern or that he 'failed' to be one. His particular form of historicism, his version of enlightenment thought and his underdetermined, tripartite, interpretive theory pushed modernism to the limit - limits beyond which ethnomethodology and mytho-semiology were to go. The comparisons with other modernist theories of social action (ethnomethodology) and material culture (mytho-semiology) show the limitations of Mannheim's method even in modernist terms. He neither tackles in any depth the issues of common-sense meaning or the status of objects as signs - but then he was working on these matters between thirty and forty years before Garfinkel and Barthes. Both ethnomethodology and semiology set the scene, in very different ways, for the emergence of a postmodern world-view; but Mannheim's discussion of the interpretation of culture anticipated the direction in which they pushed cultural analysis.

In looking at the connections between Mannheim's theory of world-views and postmodern theorising I have tried to maintain an ambivalence appropriate to both. There are connections and discontinuities between the two theoretical perspectives which I have tried to draw out, but each is founded in a rather different *weltanschauung* - although one arises out of the other. For Mannheim knowledge of the world gained through the analysis of documentary meaning could be treated as valid within relationist limits and utilised to change the world for the better. Postmodern theory extends the limits of relationism with the effect of shrinking the scope of claims for knowledge to be in relation to geographic and multiply-fractured social context as well as historical era. For Mannheim interpretation was

straightforwardly determinate in relation to objective and expressive meaning which were founded in a real world of subjects and objects. But documentary meaning was indeterminate to the extent that it depended on a quasi-real historico-cultural subject. In postmodern theory that indeterminacy extends with the dissolution of the real into the hyperreal. For Mannheim the immanence of claims to valid knowledge was used in the last instance to account for the values of history emerging 'organically' rather than being judged by an absolute standard. For postmodern theory such immanence of value becomes characteristic of all knowledge claims.

What is perhaps most remarkable is that the interpretation of *weltanschauung* described by Mannheim, is not only a precursor to the postmodern perspective, it is at the same time constitutive of it and destroyed by it. The postmodern *weltanschauung* emerges from within a thoroughly modernist world-view; only to reveal itself as an implosion of so many perspectives that none can claim the coherence of *weltanschauung* as Mannheim understood it.

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<sup>2</sup> A recent review in the **Guardian** of a biography of the later, referred to a "booming Benjamin cult" - ffytche, 1996

<sup>3</sup> Brian Longhurst also compares Mannheim's strata of meaning to Barthes's mythological analyses (Longhurst 1989: 37).

<sup>4</sup> Mannheim distinguishes between the sign as a mere vehicle for meaning and the visual or tactile form of an object which addresses the senses directly. In Barthes's theory of course the sign as vehicle of meaning becomes the signifier in a second-order system of signification, that of myth. For Barthes there is no direct communication between the object and its viewer; it is always grasped as an object within a system of signification which assigns meaning.

<sup>5</sup> In the essay on "Historicism" (1952b) Mannheim suggests that meaning does not change in material relations so that the meaning of Pythagoras's Theorem or a technical invention such as an axe does not change over time, while the contents of culture or civilisation does.

<sup>6</sup> The postmodern world-view is according to Bauman: "marked by a view of the human world as irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order, either in action or in potency" (Bauman 1992: 35).

<sup>7</sup> Barthes recognises the multiplicity of interpretations and the absence of a single, coherent myth to be uncovered somewhere between the completion of The Fashion System (1990 [1967]) and the writing of S/Z (1975 [1970]).

<sup>8</sup> In discussing an American television documentary programme, Baudrillard points out that the attempt to broadcast a raw account of the real life of a family, turns into an event that feeds back on the family which then falls apart under the exposure. The distinction between representation and reality fades as the reality of the programme, or at least its perception, competes with the reality of the family's life (Baudrillard 1994: 27).