“Dead celebrities are de facto amusing”
A postmodern analysis of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*

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Abstract

This essay examines the novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* by Douglas Coupland in an attempt to show how it is heavily postmodernist. Postmodernism is explained briefly to give an understanding of how it might be applied to the analysis of the novel. Then the analysis is divided into five different categories: characterization, language and style, setting and society, storytelling and thematic focus. Postmodernist literary theory is applied to various parts of the novel and the postmodernist features are highlighted and discussed. The conclusion is that *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* is indeed a heavily postmodernist novel.

Keywords: Douglas Coupland, Gen X, postmodernism, neologism
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**Appendix B** - List of the 96 defined neologisms presented in Generation X in order of presentation
Introduction

As I get closer to turning 30 years old, I find myself more and more firmly planted in the mindset that is often described as being a twenty-something. My own take on it is that it does not literally mean that I am between 20 and 30 years old, but rather that I have become an adult and have not yet reached my seemingly obligatory mid-life crisis. But there was something missing in my articulation of this mindset, which I was convinced was not exclusive to just me. After all, twenty-something-ness has been represented in many forms of pop culture that I have come across over the course of my life, which in turn has led me to believe that it is a pervasive mindset. Imagine my surprise when I stumbled upon the novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* by Douglas Coupland and it effectively put into words so many thoughts that I have. It fascinated me so much and on so many levels that I wanted to analyze it thoroughly, in large part to help me understand my own mindset even better. Hence, this essay.

I wanted to find out what it is that makes this book so attractive to me and the mindset of twenty-somethings. At first glance, I knew that I liked the biting cynicism and the ironic remarks about everything high and low in western society, but there were some concerns. I was a bit worried that the cultural differences between the U.S. and my home country, Sweden, would be too great, but even though I have grown up in Sweden, it is a globalized world and as such, many of the concepts in *Generation X* can be applied to things I observe here in my home country. After some brief research, it was clear to me that I could find an almost endless supply of properties in the book that make it postmodernist. That is what I will attempt to do with this essay: show that *Generation X* is heavily postmodernist and how.

The novel and its author – a brief background

Douglas Coupland is Canadian and lives in Vancouver, B.C. He was born on December 30th, 1961, and is a professional novelist, a designer and a visual artist. At this point in time he has published twelve novels, seven non-fiction books and several screenplays.

*Generation X* was Douglas Coupland’s first novel and was first published in 1991. It is a framed narrative in which the main characters share stories, both real and fantastical, with each other. Throughout the novel other, minor characters are introduced and they all represent different cultural types and through them the main characters are fleshed out more and more. It is a modern day *Decamerone*, if you will.
It is the story of Andrew “Andy” Palmer, Dagmar “Dag” Bellinghausen and Claire Baxter, a trio of twenty-somethings living on the outskirts of San Diego, California. They spend their time making sure that they are not part of the normal population. Instead of chasing the American dream, fame and fortune, office promotions and a fast lane lifestyle headed straight for the top of the status ladder, they live in bungalows on the edge of society where they tell stories to each other and work “low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future jobs in the service sector” (Coupland, 6). It is written in a quite non-traditional style and seems to be almost dripping with cynicism at first glance.

Not much happens throughout the novel. The characters either sit at home and talk, telling stories to each other, or they pack a picnic basket and go out into the desert to talk and tell stories to each other. In the final third of the novel, there is some variation since they travel to different places to celebrate Christmas and New Year’s Day, at which point they talk on the phone, telling each other stories. It ends with the three of them escaping their dead-end jobs to start their own hotel on the border to Mexico.

Method and structure

I intend to textually analyze the novel, which will henceforth be referred to as GX, in an attempt to show that it is heavily postmodernist. To do this, I will use central concepts of postmodernist theory and apply them to different parts of the novel. Thus, I will, first, explain the central points of postmodernism relevant to this essay, because without that the rest of the analysis will not be very helpful or easy to understand; then there will be five main points of focus to see how Coupland makes different postmodernist features interact. The first part will be an analysis of language and style, the second will deal with characterization, the third will go into the novel’s setting and view of society, the fourth part will briefly look at storytelling, and the fifth will combine the first four parts to highlight how postmodernist writing uses many different literary features together to achieve certain effects.

What is postmodernism?

In his book, Postmodern Literature, Ian Gregson provides a succinct definition of what postmodernism is:

The dominant attitude in postmodernism is disbelief. The dominant strategy of both postmodernist philosophy and postmodernist aesthetics is deconstruction, which is disbelief put into practice. Deconstruction is an anti-
system, or a system that subverts systems; it is a mechanism that exposes mechanisms. Deconstruction unscrews belief systems and uncovers their whirring cogs. (1)

Further definition of what postmodernism entails obviously becomes somewhat blurry and requires an understanding of the social and cultural conditions leading up to the postmodern period. Gregson notes that the beginnings of postmodernism “can be traced back to the Victorian period and the cultural crisis at that time, which involved the waning of Christianity as a result of the power of scientific theories” (1), which helped pave the way for modernism’s growth in popularity. Gregson continues, saying that World War II was the springboard from modernism into full-blown postmodernism, because of the horrors that war presented to the world. The most crucial event was the holocaust because it single-handedly supplied most people with a reason to doubt reality itself simply because it was completely unfathomable that such a heinous crime had been committed. The massive genocide was the height of irrationality and destroyed the belief in rational human progress (8). Jean-Francois Lyotard, a very prominent postmodernist theorist explains the phenomenon as “[a]ll that is real is rational, all that is rational is real: ‘Auschwitz’ refutes speculative doctrine. At least that crime, which was real, was not rational” (qtd. in Gregson 8). Since Coupland uses elements of World War II, most notably the atomic bomb, fairly frequently in GX, it is one of the most obvious postmodernist characteristics of the novel. This will be analyzed in depth later on in this essay.

As mentioned, there is a close link between modernism and postmodernism. An argument can be made that it is difficult to define postmodernism because it is equally difficult to define modernism, which postmodernism is a reaction to. Dino Felluga writes that modernism was a time when ideas about how to improve the world blossomed both in scope and in number.¹ There was wild experimentation in both the cultural arena and politics and some visionaries tried to create political utopias through “isms” such as fascism, communism, nazism and anarchism while cultural manifestos such as cubism, dadaism, futurism, surrealism and minimalism came to the fore. When it came to aesthetics, modernism employed, among other things, self-reflexivity, radical experimentation in form, alternative ways of thinking about representation and the use of parody and irony. The aforementioned disbelief which characterizes postmodernism eventually started manifesting itself in many

facets of culture, building on these stylistic features common to modernism. All of the mentioned features are used frequently in GX and I will look at and discuss them throughout this essay.

Another important phenomenon of postmodernism is the emergence and impact of technological advances in media, especially television. According to Gregson the evolution of media has had considerable effect on “social experience and cultural perception” (2). Coupland touches on this often in GX and in some cases he even shows how the media has changed the way we think and even the way we dream or imagine.

Sometimes it is difficult to know whether or not postmodernist writers are serious or not, or even if they are trying to depict anything real or something artificial that is supposed to be construed as real. Susan Sontag was important in the early stages of postmodernism because of her book Notes on Camp:

Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman but a ‘woman’. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater. (qtd. in Gregson 10)

To postmodernists, not even life is real. That is very telling of the amount of incredulity one should employ when reading postmodernist writers or novels. In fact, Gregson claims that a big problem for postmodernist literature is that the loss of referents - meaning that the reader cannot know if what is being represented is based on something real - leads to writing that is “pure textual play” (15). This is probably because postmodernists claim that historical experience shows that we are surrounded by representations rather than truth, especially since everything from mass-merchandizing, to education, to politics is conducted as branches of advertising. Gregson says that it is impossible to function mentally without deconstructing everyone’s claims (20). Andrew Tate adds “[i]n such an era the delicate line between fact and fantasy disappears, the imagination is penetrated and rewired by an ever more pervasive mass media” (39f). W.J.T. Mitchell states that “[p]ostmodern culture is often characterized as an era of ‘hyper-representation’” which connects to Tate’s argument. Virtually nothing can be taken seriously because of the blurry line between fact and fiction and this is what hyper-representation means (16, edited by Lentricchia & McLaughlin).
Analysis - Characterization

First of all, something important should be noted about postmodernist characters. Aleid Fokkema writes that although there are as many fictional characters in postmodernist novels as there are in any other literary style, the real characters in postmodernist fiction are the readers of the novels. “It is the reader whose psyche is probed,” and the way postmodernist characters engage the reader and leave room for his or her own fantasies is one of the key points of postmodernist literature (61). In fact, some postmodernist theorists go so far as to refuse to call them characters of fiction. Instead they call them ‘figures’ or ‘cartoons’ in order to emphasize that they are not real characters or based on anything real. To call them figures or cartoons highlights that they are mere fractions of true characters, often possessing only a handful of characteristics (60). He concludes that “characters in such [read: postmodernist] texts are ultimately grounded in language, cut off from anything that might be experienced as ‘natural’ or ‘real’ reality” (67).

Andy is of course, as the narrator of the book, the most visible of the three main characters. Even though Coupland gives the other two their own voices, especially during the storytelling parts of the book, everything is still affected by Andy and his thoughts, because the vast majority of the book is told through his perspective. He is probably the easiest character to identify with, considering that he is not a borderline criminal, like Dag, or hails from an abundantly rich family, like Claire. He is a middle child in a very ordinary, middle class family. He also complains a lot about his family and their socioeconomic status. The most telling of his complaints is when he rants about the middle class:

You see, when you’re middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you. You have to live with the fact that history can never champion your causes and that history will never feel sorry for you. It is the price that is paid for day-to-day comfort and silence. And because of this price, all happinesses are sterile; all sadnesses go unpitied. (171)

Considering how much Andy complains about his family, especially about being a middle child, this rant feels more targeted at his parents specifically, not history or society per se. It is essentially hyperbole because Andy has gotten a flair for the dramatic after telling so many stories. The exaggeration is a way to spice up the story a bit. What, or rather who, he complains the most about is his younger brother Tyler. At the midpoint of the book, when he is talking to Tyler on the phone, he introduces his ‘dear’ brother as “Prince Tyler of Portland”
(120) and goes on to whine about how Tyler gets spoiled by their parents and that none of the other siblings would ever get away with the things Tyler does, for example demanding that their mother take his plate of macaroni and cheese to heat it up because there is a cold patch in the middle. Andy projects a lot of his fears onto Tyler and his friends, but more on that later in the essay.

The character Dag is probably the most extreme and hyper-represented of the three main characters in GX and therefore the most obvious postmodernist among them. He is a belligerent miscreant who just shrugs when he accidentally sets fire to a car whose roof he’s been sitting on, burning a hole in the detachable cabriolet roof with the still-burning stub of his cigarette, having no qualms about blaming a homeless man if he were ever to be questioned by the police about it. At another point he promptly eats a fifty dollar bill he has won from Andy in a bet, saying “Hey Andy. You are what you eat” (21).

Dag explains how he got to the point in life where he does not care about consequences during one of his storytelling moments. He says that he went through a monumental crisis that encompassed “the failure of youth but also a failure of class and of sex and the future and I still don’t know what,” going on to say that he lost the ability to take anything literally (36). Dag, the character, is quite clearly the most obvious personification of a postmodernist reaction in that he breaks all the rules and refuses to conform to anything. Him saying that he lacks the ability to take anything literally can be taken as Coupland’s novel saying that it is no use trying to figure out what is real or not. Since there are never any negative consequences for Dag, even when he is wanted by the police, the novel is saying that there is nothing to lose by adopting such an approach to life.

Claire, on the other hand, is the most difficult character to clearly label as postmodernist. Of the three main characters, she is the only one who is still bothered by her work situation for most of the novel. She is also the one most bothered by her pursuit of a love interest. Dag is trying to win the favor of one of Claire’s friends, Elvissa, but is largely unsuccessful. Claire, on the other hand, is in an on-again, off-again relationship with a rich playboy, Tobias, from New York. She calls him a “walking orgasm,” he comes to visit the trio in the desert sometimes and she spends New Year’s Day with him in New York. Andy and Dag cannot stand Tobias, which could be Coupland marking resistance to the traditional social construct of being in a relationship to be a successful person in the eyes of the public.

Claire is also the one who sees her family the most out of the three, having all of them visit at the beginning of the book. At the end of the book she also tries to bond with Tobias’ mother, although that proves to be a lost cause. Her family is pressuring her to live a
normal life and that might be why she still thinks it is important to have a good job and a future. Then again, at the end of the GX, she has become jaded and it is her and Dag’s plan to start a hotel on the Mexican border, just to get away from it all even more. Curiously, Andy still considers Claire to have left her old life behind, even if she frets about work. It could be that her wanting to find proper work is some sort of rebellion against her own family and therefore is postmodernist in that way.

Mr. M., a smaller character in GX, is the employer of Andy and Dag. He owns the bar where they work as bartenders and Andy describes him as a sort of comic relief to the group of main characters. It is, however, not because he tells good jokes, but rather because he is easy to laugh at for Andy, Dag and Claire. Andy says the following about Mr. M.: "He’s never funny, but he’s funny" (127). Gregson puts forth a theory that is applicable to Mr. M. and that is the usage of fragmentary names, for example using ‘initials’ or ‘blanks’, is a way to draw attention to them textually in order to emphasize that they are not real, that something is missing from their character. According to Gregson, the pointing out that something or someone is not real but textual, is the most characteristic postmodernist thinking. “It is this which leads to deconstruction because it motivates the characteristic desire to reveal that what claims to be real or natural is actually artificial, is actually fabricated” (4). Mr. M. is largely presented as a cliché older man who does not understand Andy’s generation but wants to be surrounded by them to retain his youth and Andy also explains that they laugh at his jokes to keep him happy just because he pays their salary. The fragmentary name coupled with the cliché characterization in a sea of off-the-wall characters makes it obvious that Coupland is presenting a typical archetype character. It is only later that Coupland reveals Mr. M.’s full surname to be MacArthur, but the point has already been made.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, the master of postmodernist theory, says that capitalism has the power to “derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions” to the point where realistic representation cannot present reality except as nostalgia or mockery and then it is only for suffering, not satisfaction. (74) The main characters of GX are again written to look jaded and bitter when it comes to the world outside their own bubble, because of capitalism.

**Analysis - Language and style**

Gregson says “postmodernist disbelief is extended first and foremost to language. For literature, the most important impact of this is to question, and even to pour scorn upon, realism” (3). That the notion of a text being realistic is mocked by postmodernists. Gregson goes on to say that literature, apart from using the systems of language itself, is also a type of
system containing specifically literary signs and codes; even rules, one might claim. This system, he states, further removes the literary from the real by “imposing alien structures upon the world” (4). Postmodernism therefore strives to expose these structures by going beyond them. Lyotard writes that all previous narrative, which is what he calls essentially all of humanity’s shared history and experience, and all established stylistic operators are used without regard for what cultural and literary norms are already in place. Thus new stylistic operators are created through postmodernism. Postmodernist literature no longer accepts the literary norms, the grammar and vocabulary, as given or conventional, because that prevents the “unpresentable from being put forward” (80f). Postmodernist writers often use unconventional means to make points.

Coupland uses italicized text all through the novel with notable frequency. Most of the time he uses it to represent people emphasizing words or even parts of words when they speak. A lot of the characters get their words italicized by Coupland throughout GX but it is by far the most common for Claire and her family, which will be delved into further later on in the essay.

There are also small, but noticeable stylistic touches here and there in the book. For example, Andy describes little brother Tyler’s friends as “Bill-cubed, actually Bill\textsuperscript{3}, is three of Tyler’s friends, all named Bill” (120) with the heightened ‘3’ being a stylistic one-shot in GX, but still enough to be noticed as something that could only be done in text and therefore is artificial, again reinforcing the postmodernist touches.

The two most blatant postmodernist operators that Coupland uses in GX which could be considered postmodernist are what I call overtly subliminal advertisements (or ‘bumper stickers’) and defined neologisms. Together, they are used consistently throughout the novel, at the bottom of roughly every third page, along with inserts of illustrations, although those do not appear as frequently as the neologisms or bumper stickers. The mentioned stylistic operators will now be introduced one by one.

Coupland introduces bumper stickers already on the second page of prose, on which the regular text takes up three quarters of the page. The text is then cut off by a line and centered in the space that is free of text is a box that looks like this:
The first chapter of the novel, which this bumper sticker is a part of, starts out with the narrator, Andy, telling the story of how he spent every penny he had to buy a plane ticket from Portland, Oregon in the U.S. to Brandon, Manitoba in Canada only to witness a total eclipse of the sun. What happens is that the reader starts out reading about that story and, after turning the page, is then met with that glaring box taking up a quarter of the space on the page. Coupland makes the message he is trying to convey so obvious and provocative that it is difficult to know if that is actually the message he is trying to convey. This is a clear example of a postmodern stylistic operator. In total there are 19 of these bumper stickers throughout the novel, all of them listed in appendix A in order of appearance.

Defined neologisms appear more often than the bumper stickers in the novel. There are 96 in total, all of them listed in Appendix B in order of appearance, and they are placed at the bottom of the pages as ‘footnotes’, often many on one page. On page six, still in chapter one, the first neologism is defined at the bottom of the page, below a line divider. It uses the same formatting as all the other neologisms, with the new expression in bold letters and then the definition. They look like this:

**McJob**: A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one. *(6)*

Again there is a connection between the stylistic operator and the prose, as Andy casually introduces the term “McJob” on the previous page: “a message that I suppose irked Dag, who was bored and cranky after eight hours of working his McJob” *(5)*. After reading it in passing the first time and then getting the full description of the new term on the next page, it is probable that the reader will stop and think about Dag’s situation in life. It is also possible that the reader does not like the prospect of holding a McJob, for one of two reasons. Either it is because they have worked at a McJob at one point in their lives, making them agree with the
first part of the definition because of experience; or it is because they have not and do not want to get a McJob because they have the same idea of what it entails, making them understand the irony in the second part of the definition. Regardless, Coupland uses irony to great effect and manages to expose a social construct through this second postmodernist stylistic operator.

Coupland does not restrict himself to using the neologisms in single chapters. He continues to use McJob later on in GX, enforcing the use of his new words, almost to the point where it becomes casual, which is probably the whole point, to add them to the vernacular of whatever audience the novel gets.

It should be noted that there is not always a clear connection between the prose in the chapter and the bumper stickers and neologisms. Frequently Coupland will introduce one neologism that is related to the prose and directly beneath that neologism, another one will be listed that has a vague connection to the first one, but no connection to the prose. Regardless of whether or not there is a direct connection to the prose, most of them serve to make the reader think. Tate points out that “[h]is work seeks, creatively and perhaps obsessively, to define new idioms that might represent and recover the strangeness of contemporary life” (39). This holds true for most of them, which can be seen in the appendices.

The illustrations in the novel vary between simple pictures of, for example, furniture labelled “semi-disposable Swedish furniture,” obviously referring to IKEA, and 1950’s style comic strips of one or two comic panels.

Coupland uses two pictures in the beginning of the book when he’s explaining what a McJob is. On one page, in the bottom quarter as usual, there is a simple picture of a male bicycle courier and on the next page, a female office temp is pictured. Both look quite happy and are used as examples of how simple and undemanding McJobs generally are.

Comic strips are a bit more common than the regular pictures throughout the novel, although the number of them is less than ten. A good example of one of the comic strips is the one found on page 38, in which a woman working in an office says “I try to imagine myself in this same job one year from now…” in the first panel and “…but I’m just not seeing any pictures” in the second. Again Coupland uses irony as a postmodernist tool. The woman is in a picture when she says that she is not seeing any pictures. The strip can also be interpreted as a critique of our general lack of imagination, especially how it has been tied to the medium of television and how TV-dependent our way of thinking has become. Gregson makes this point when he discusses how postmodernism relates to television:
[the] postmodern dominance of simulation, on a culture so influenced by the technological media that any sense of the real is lost and replaced by the multiplying of signs and representations. Depthless simulacra are so all-pervading that they create a sense that experience cannot be real unless it is represented, preferably by television. (9)

There is a very clear pattern in GX at the beginning of each chapter. There are no chapter numbers, but rather a title or phrase that is often a play on words that is related to what is about to happen. Beneath this title there is always the same, small picture of some clouds in the sky. After this the prose starts, and here is when the postmodernist touch comes in. There are no line breaks on the first page of each chapter. The text stretches the full length of every line, even if there is supposed to be a line break in there, marking a new paragraph. Coupland has simply replaced each line break with the typographic sign for a line break, which looks like this: ¶

The combined effects of the cloud picture and the wall of text the usage of the ¶ symbol creates, makes for a very reproduced look for every chapter, re-enforcing the notion that the book is not depicting something that is real but rather that it is artificial.

All of the different stylistic operators used by Coupland are needed in the book, because, as Gregson notes, the visual properties of any given text are important to postmodernists, essentially “celebrating the range of expressive capabilities it contains” (16). Aaron Schutz explains that the obscure and often difficult stylistic approach used by a lot of postmodernistic writers is not accidental. It is used to acknowledge the issues of struggle and power in the postmodern world. Schutz claims that the postmodernist writers are trying to match the ways in which the world is changing by creating “new spaces, practices and values” (219). Lyotard says that the whole range of narrative, as in our collective history and experience, and even stylistic operators are used without thinking about unity or text as a whole, and that new operators are tried on a whim (80f). I do not think this is the case with Coupland, considering the uniformity in how he uses his postmodernist stylistic operators. Lyotard continues, saying that grammar and vocabulary are not accepted because using them in the traditional sense is making oneself, as a writer, a slave to serve under them, preventing the “unpresentable from being put forward” (80f). This is because the postmodernist writer is not strictly a writer, but rather a philosopher because what he writes is not governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to familiar categories. Coupland follows established grammar, but not the structural conventions governing paragraphs (at least not in
the traditional typographical manner). He also clearly feels restricted by the English vocabulary, or he would not invent so many neologisms.

**Analysis - Setting and society**

One of the main purposes of postmodernist literature is to shed light on the problem of finding or creating one’s identity in a more and more media-saturated, capitalist world where most parts of the world have been populated. Sally Dalton-Brown notes that the main characters in *GX* are hiding their identities from marketers trying to fit them into a demographic and thereby create their identities for them. She goes on to say that they are escaping materialist society to mould their own identities on their own terms. (239f)

As opposed to the purely capitalist motive, Brian Jarvis argues that there can be a simultaneous movement both in terms of geography and economic or social class. He points to the postmodernist author Thomas Pynchon and several of the characters in Pynchon’s novels. One of them, a character called Flange, according to Jarvis, “leaves the world of the PMC (Professional-Managerial Class) for the company of eccentric non-conformists” and actually moves into a worn-down dump underground (54). This can be interpreted as being both a literal move down geographically as well as a move down the social ladder. Jarvis explains that in another one of Pynchon’s novels, what he writes can be interpreted as him saying that we do not have the right to tie our identity to any place (53).

Coupland takes this a step further in *GX*, saying in Andy’s voice that it does not matter where we are from: "I, for that matter, am from Portland, Oregon, but where you’re from feels sort of irrelevant these days (‘Since everyone has the same stores in their minis,‘ according to my younger brother, Tyler)” (5). Coupland obviously makes the connection between capitalism and how it has made geography largely irrelevant. The only place where geography matters is where capitalism cannot reach. Tate, in his book analysing Douglas Coupland, says that “the desert resists commerce and human intervention but promotes imaginative endeavour“ (125) and that probably comes from the statement by Andy in *GX*: “Here the three of us merely eat a box of lunch on a land that is barren – the equivalent of blank space at the end of a chapter – and a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony” (19). The blank space at the end of a chapter is Andy’s way of saying that it is time for a new story to be told, either by him or by his friends.

Coupland often provides commentary on the effects of capitalism in *GX*. An example of this is the reflection that the era in which Andy and his friends are living is described as “when nearly all real estate is coveted and developed” (17). Andy says that he is
part of “the poverty jet set, an enormous global group” referring to anyone that can experience the luxury of flying but still does not have a lot of disposable income (5). This kind of juxtaposition is something that Coupland uses quite a bit and especially when it comes to comparing rich and poor people.

Heather Hicks analyzes the conditions that capitalism has brought to the workplace and its effects on America. She claims that capitalism forced a shift in the authority structure of the male middle class by, in the post-war years, starting to move most of that work force from small property ownership to corporate employment. With that came a work culture that was feminizing, taking away men’s masculinity. Hicks calls this “the culture of soft work” and also argues that the need for self-actualization through the workplace must be set in motion by the human relations in corporations (10). There is a consumer ethic in the workplace, making the labor of a job something the workers consume in an effort to enhance their lives, almost as if choosing your profession is like choosing from a menu to spice up your life. (7) All the while the purely masculine jobs have dwindled in America, with most of the work force being used in service-minded labor instead of industrial, muscle-based work that is the ‘real’ masculine work. Hicks means that:

this new socioeconomic formation has realigned the signifiers of economic production with those of femininity. Soft work collapses the boundaries between worker and consumer, rationality and emotion, publicity and privacy, the real and unreal, the American and “un-American,” and the managerial and magical. (3)

Christopher Dummitt goes further back in time to explain the diminishing of masculinity. It should be noted that Dummitt writes about Canada, but since the cultures and economy of Canada and the US are still very close, and Coupland is Canadian himself, Dummitt’s work is relevant to an analysis of Coupland’s work. Dummitt notes that the lack of masculinity started presenting itself as far back as The Great Depression, which had “cast doubt on a number of longstanding beliefs about the natural divisions between the sexes, perhaps the most important being that men were the natural breadwinners in a family.” (4) He goes on to argue that this was enforced during World War II, when even more women entered the work force, alienating men from their role as breadwinners, taking away their masculinity, effectively making men victims of the change in norm in modern society.
In *GX* the main characters talk about McJobs as if they are simple commodities that can be changed without much trouble, because there is nothing to be invested in them anyway. Considering that neither Andy nor Dag want to be a part of the norm, it can be argued that they are actually not victims, even if at least Andy considers himself to be one. They also do not look for their jobs to be a part of their identity or to actualize them.

Dummitt says that workers are estranged from their labor under capitalism, that there is a disconnect between the worker and what he produces, what he achieves. “Ultimately, this leads to an estrangement from something essential both in themselves and in their relations with others” (6). This notion applies perfectly to the characters in *GX* and how they regard their jobs. They self-actualize through their relations and the stories they tell to each other.

Aleid Fokkema claims that:

> postmodern texts do not urge readers to expand their consciousness but are more concerned with the politics of language and culture and work to expose the strategies of power and knowledge. Postmodern fiction foregrounds the false claims of representation and reveals that such claims are grounded in a discourse of power. (63)

This is the essence of *GX*. Every little aspect of the novel serves to highlight the way an entire generation has been caught up in the strange power structure of postwar America, while also managing to comment on the generation that came before, the Baby Boomers, as well as the generation that comes after it, mostly through Andy’s younger brother Tyler. The Baby Boomers even get their own neologism in ‘Boomer Envy’, which Coupland defines as the envy of material wealth and security obtained by a generation through sheer fortunate birth date. Sherry B. Ortner goes into detail comparing Generation X, which she calls the ‘Baby Busters’, to the Baby Boomer generation and she finds that the Baby Busters are the first generation that does not match or surpass their parents in terms of financial success or stability (417). She continues to talk about how the McJobs are especially galling to most Generation Xers simply because most of them have actually put in the time and money to get a proper college education, often getting themselves stuck with student loans that do not help their economic situation in the least (418). Ortner concludes her article by saying that Generation X has always, first and foremost, been about finding identity through work: “jobs, money and careers,” and that the issues have been economic from the very beginning, ranging
from working harder for less money, to getting degrees that lead to nowhere (421). It is then interesting that Andy, Dag and Claire try to resist the notion of finding identity through work.

Tate says that the characters of \textit{GX} try to find emancipation or healing through the process of narration. They seek a more compelling version of both their own and society’s history. Tate also questions whether or not the storytelling becomes redemptive or if it is just to “disguise unresolved problems of representation, evading political engagements” (41). An interesting counterpoint is brought up by Seamus Deane in the part he writes for \textit{Critical Terms for Literary Study}. To fetishize that which is different and outside the norm may be “an emancipatory gesture in itself,” and that is certainly the point of \textit{GX}, for Coupland to liberate Generation X from the bonds of corporate power and capitalism. But, Deane continues, the act of determining what ‘difference’ or ‘otherness’ is “might itself be a ruse of power” (357, edited by Lentricchia & McLaughlin). Does this mean that Coupland’s characters are not only trying to liberate themselves, but also to establish power? It is an interesting perspective and one that should not be forgotten.

\section*{Analysis - Storytelling}

Andy, Dag and Claire have one thing that is central to their lives and that is storytelling. Essentially, they live life in order to collect stories or ideas for stories that they can then tell each other. There are minor characters, friends of the trio, that also get to tell stories, or rather, the trio practically forces them to tell stories. That is just the way things are when you are hanging out with Andy, Dag and Claire. This kind of fragmentation is one of the most important characteristics of postmodernism, according to R. Wesley Hurd of Gutenberg College.\footnote{Hurd, R. Wesley. \textit{Postmodernism}}

Coupland makes a point about Andy, Dag and Claire not owning any television sets. The storytelling is probably a part of his critique of the mass media climate and TV in particular. Perhaps he believes that TV kills our collective ability to tell stories like we used to. He also uses two related neologisms called ‘Historical Underdosing’ and ‘Historical Overdosing’ to critique the media climate. Their definitions are “To live in a period of time when nothing seems to happen / when too much seems to happen,” depending on how you look at it.

The stories have an incredible range in both composition and theme, as well as whether or not they are taken from the group’s real world experiences or just pure fantasy.
One story is about a spaceman in Texlahoma, which is a fictional archipelago of small moons just above the Earth, combining the cliché characteristics of Texas and Oklahoma, making everyone who lives there a hillbilly. They often return to Texlahoma as a setting. Another story is about one of Dag’s childhood memories when his dad takes him for a ride in their new car. The stories do not really have morals to them and sometimes not even a rational point, making the storytelling a way to pass the time and make light of society and their own situations.

When someone starts telling a story, it is their turn to talk and no one interrupts them once they start. The only time it happens is after Dag has been missing for five days and suddenly calls Andy on the phone.

“Dag, what the hell are you doing in Nevada?”
“You wouldn’t understand.”
“Try me.”
“I don’t know—“
“Then make a story out of it. Where are you calling from?”
“I’m inside a diner at a pay phone. I’m using Mr. M.’s calling card number. He won’t mind.”
“You really abuse that guy’s goodwill, Dag. You can’t coast on your charm forever.”
“Did I phone Dial-a-Lecture? And do you want to hear my story or not?”
Of course I do. “Okay, so I’ll shut up, already. Shoot.” (77)

Apparently it has gotten to the point where they sometimes cannot converse regularly. Andy has to coax Dag into telling him what has happened because he knows Dag cannot say no to telling a story. The interruption of Dag’s story is unintentional just because Andy had to trick Dag and he was not prepared for it to start immediately. Regardless, Dag proceeds to tell a story where a character named ‘Otis’ tries to cure his ‘Bomb anxiety’. It is obvious that it is Dag that is the main character of the story, but the group members seldom talk about themselves in the first person when they tell stories, instead they invent random fictional characters to represent themselves. This vague form of identity is a typical representation of postmodernist writing.

Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein have done a lot of research about storytelling and organized conversations, especially in organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, where everyone is welcome to talk and will not get interrupted (127ff). There are a lot of
similarities between that and the storytelling culture in GX. There is never any competition between the characters to tell stories, just like in the researched AA meetings, and there is a distinct method to create a ‘preface’ for each story, which is the setup the storyteller uses to initiate his or her turn to tell a story. Also, it gives the audience a signal to relax and listen, because they will get another signal when a new storyteller should start talking, but only when the current storyteller is done (132). Gubrium and Holstein conclude that how we “story ourselves” is a large part in determining who we are, our identity, and establishing a method for storytelling helps us decide how to be ‘read’ or ‘heard’ (205). This is one of the most prominent messages Coupland seems to be sending with GX, especially since he makes all of the characters and their stories so diverse but yet such a big part of themselves.

**Analysis - Thematic focus**

When it comes to the combination of characterization and style, Coupland is very effective. One of the most obvious examples is the way he depicts Claire and her family through the use of italics. When they are introduced early on in GX, Andy describes the way they talk as “Their talk was endless, compulsive, and indulgent, sometimes sounding like the remains of the English language after having been hashed over by nuclear war survivors for a few hundred years“ (39). The Baxter family is depicted as a posh, self-absorbed, New Age clan preoccupied with vapid and irrelevant questions such as the accuracy of Nostradamus predictions. In almost every line of spoken dialogue by the family, there is an italicized word. Coupland also makes them emphasize the middle part of words, seemingly at random: “Did Nostradamus ever say anything about random snipers?” The Baxter family makes Susan Sontag’s *Notes on Camp* come to mind because each time a word is in italics it is as if the character saying it is gesturing to make quotation marks in the air around the word, so to speak (qtd. in Gregson 10).

In the latter part of GX, after the three main characters have been apart to celebrate New Year’s Day in different cities, Andy is talking to Claire when he makes the following remark about her: “Claire’s on the phone from New York with a note of confidence that’s never been there before – more italics than usual” (177). This only re-enforces the notion that the italics are there to denote confidence to the point of being stuck up because the person considers themselves to be superior. It should be noted that Claire and her family are not the only characters in the book whose dialogue is italicized, but they are by far the ones that it happens to the most and they are most certainly the only ones with which Coupland
decides to go metatextual, as seen by Andy’s acknowledgement that the emphasized words are set in italics. It is also yet another example of how the novel flaunts its artificiality.

Since Andy is the narrator, Coupland can use stylistic tools in his characterization that he is not be able to use with Dag or Claire. The main example of this is the use of parentheses to voice Andy’s thoughts. At one point, Andy is asked if he is going to a party to tend the bar, but Andy does not know about the party and Coupland uses an interesting way to illustrate that to the reader. It looks like this on the page:

“I’m back,” says Claire, “with some lovely cheesecake. Are you going to help Dag tend bar at Bunny Hollander’s party tomorrow night?”
(What party?)
”What party?” (181)

With Andy as the narrator, he is always telling the reader about his thoughts on whatever is going on. This makes the use of parentheses interesting. It is almost as if whatever is mentioned in the parentheses is an impulsive thought that suddenly appears as Andy is telling the story and those new thoughts were not initially planned to be part of Andy’s narrative. But since the reader knows it is a fictional story and Andy is not real, the attempt to humanize the artificial - make it a bit more realistic - while at the same time using the parentheses, is a clear postmodernist textual move.

Something that is very prevalent in GX and in postmodernism in general is the obsession with celebrities, especially dead ones that become icons. They serve as grand monuments of how utterly surreal life is. Dag touches on this in a very effective way when he says ”Sometimes […] I have a real problem remembering if a celebrity is dead or not. But then I realize it doesn’t really matter” (129). He is effectively saying that the whole point of celebrities is to be some sort of specter of society. The point of them is to be there as concepts, untouchable to the normal people who should crave their success and everlasting youth.

There is even a neologism called ‘Fame-induced Apathy’ which means that no activity is worth pursuing unless you can become very famous pursuing it (174). At another point in the story, Dag is tending bar at a party and Andy muses that there is a hint of celebrities there, although there are not actually any real celebrities there. At the same party he also says that the lighting and architecture are designed to make everyone look “fa-bulous.” Coupland is again making good use of italics for emphasis and camp. Dag cynically
ends his thoughts about the party with “In spite of the celebrity shortage, the party is fa-
bulous, as just about everybody keeps reminding each other” (191).

There is a bit of fame obsession used when Andy is talking about his family too,
describing his brothers and sisters. His descriptions of his younger brother Tyler being a
‘prince’ has already been established, but he also has this to say about his sister Deirdre: “She
was the Best Looking and Most Popular of the Palmer girls” (154). Obviously, Deirdre has
not actually won any awards or gained any sort of official fame, because those titles are fake,
Andy is again being bitter about his siblings. It is still a shrewd move to indicate Deirdre’s
place in the Palmer family hierarchy. Andy makes an interesting observation about how his
family works, suggesting that his parents cultivated competition among the siblings:

I have three brothers and three sisters, and we were never a "hugging
family.” I, in fact, have no memory of having once been hugged by a parental
unit (frankly, I’m suspicious of the practice). No, I think *psychic dodge ball*
would probably better define our family dynamic. (155)

Andy has a special relationship with his brother Tyler and it is initially based on envy towards
Tyler and his whole generation, but mainly it is because Andy sort of projects the antithesis of
himself onto Tyler, making his little brother impervious to and unfazed by all the things that
trouble Andy. In Andy’s eyes, Tyler is not bothered by anything and is just lazily breezing
through his young life without a care in the world, mostly because of his youth and Andy’s
perception of the naïveté that comes with youth. In the early part of *GX*, Andy - and Dag for
that matter, but that is beside the point - shares with the reader how he gets envious when he
sees young people without a care in the world. “She’s right. I’m just jealous of how unafraid
Tyler’s friends are of the future. Scared and envious” (160). Andy does not, however, resort to
jaded and bitter comments about how young people will adopt his mindset soon enough, that
they will see how pointless the rat race is. Instead of always singling Tyler out, he simply
observes that he wishes that he was as naïve as they are.

Later on in the book, when Andy is visiting his family in Portland over Christmas,
he talks to Tyler on a few separate occasions. This is when Tyler suddenly surprises him by
effectively proving Andy wrong about every one of the preconceived notions he has about
Tyler. Andy has been guarding himself, as usual, trying to look untroubled in front of Tyler
when Tyler asks what Andy is doing, why Andy is always “skimming the surface of life, like
a water spider,” stops only to say that he is worried about losing his big brother, worried about
getting left behind. He then explains that he knows that Andy thinks he enjoys his easy life, but that his heart is only half in it. Andy tries to stop him, but he launches into this:

"I just get so sick of being jealous of everything, Andy.‘ There’s no stopping the boy. ‘And it scares me that I don’t see a future. And I don’t understand this reflex of mine to be such a smartass about everything. It really scares me. I may not look like I’m paying any attention to anything, Andy, but I am. But I can’t allow myself to show it. And I don’t know why.” (173)

Essentially, Andy’s thoughts about the younger generation get turned upside down and he is very fast to catch on to whatever prestige he can get, which shows with the “There’s no stopping the boy” comment. He quickly realizes that he is the one in a position of power. He is the wise one without any troubles. But as quickly as he realizes that, he stops talking about it with Tyler.

As has been mentioned in this essay, the most pivotal point in history for postmodernism is World War II. This was because the atrocities that happened during that war had never been seen before and could hardly be fathomed. It created distrust towards reality and people started questioning what was real or not and most importantly, if anything had a point anymore. The Holocaust in particular was mentioned as the virtual mother of postmodernism. There was, however, another almost unbelievable thing that happened during World War II and that is America bringing Japan to its knees with the atomic bomb, almost entirely wiping out the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The power of the atomic bomb was, and still is, so awesome that it to this date has never again been used in an armed conflict. Dag is extremely preoccupied with the atomic bomb that he tells several stories about how it all ends, often in his dreams. He is usually in a mall when it happens and he figures that it is because he should be prepared and in a mall he can get everything he needs to live if he survives the blast.

After World War II ended, the Cold War started and it was the default state of mind among a lot of Americans to be in constant fear of the atomic bomb that one day might light up the sky and wipe out civilization. It was like this until the year GX was published, which is when the Cold War ended. Dag, however, does not fear the atomic bomb. He revels in it and almost wants it to happen, mostly to level the playing field for everyone, so that his reality becomes the norm for everyone else. Yes, Dag is quite histrionic. He even has a name for it. He calls it ‘The Flash’ with capital letters. Personifying the atomic bomb is an
interesting move by Coupland, but it certainly fits with postmodernism. He also has peculiarly named neologism that touches on the Cold War angst. It is called ‘Strangelove Reproduction’ and is defined as “Having children to make up for the fact that one no longer believes in the future” (156). Obviously this is a tribute to one of the greatest movies of the Cold War era, one that was a giant pastiche about nuclear scare situations in the 1960s. At one point there is a single picture taking up the whole page, again looking like a 1950s comic strip. It features a man looking out through a window, seeing a flash in the sky, shielding his eyes from it. First he says “Oh no! It’s finally happened! The blinding flash of light!” and in the second text box he says ”Phew! It was only lightning” (152). It is the kind of ironic gallows humor that can be expected in postmodernist literature.

As has been mentioned in the essay, Dag tries to cure his ‘Bomb anxiety’ and he does so by going to an old nuclear bomb test site in New Mexico, where he buys a present for Claire. She is by no means ecstatic about the present she gets, sand turned into green crystals from the heat of the bomb blast, and Dag does not understand why she gets hysterical, because he is just so happy to have faced his biggest fear. It is ironic that him facing his greatest fear creates a new conflict for him, but Claire gets over it after Dag and Andy meticulously clean her apartment as she orders them.

In the last chapter of GX, just before the epilogue, Andy has decided to tag along with Dag and Claire and become part of their hotel business on the Mexico border. He recounts some of the stories he has already told to Dag and Claire, a couple about a main character called ‘Young Man’ and at the end of the chapter he says that he will tell the reader another story about that Young Man, but it will be a bit more complex than usual. Then he stops himself in a moment of honesty and thorough non-postmodernism: “The second story, well, it’s a bit more complex, and I’ve never told anyone before. It’s about a young man – oh, get real – it’s about me” (202). It is the only time in the book where any of the characters let go of the distance they keep to everything and starts being really honest. After this, Andy describes a vision that he has, about how he wants to get fed by a pelican while being in an emaciated state much like Jesus hanging on the cross after several days. It is very unlike the rest of the novel and it would figure that it is Andy at his most honest, for the duration of the book at least.

After the epilogue, after all the prose has been written, Coupland is not quite done. He adds another section spanning three pages. It is called ‘Numbers’ and functions like an appendix that has not been referred to during the course of the novel. However, it is full of statistics that emphasizes all the points Coupland has attempted to make with the prose of the
novel. All the statistics are properly referenced and they range from the number of dead lakes in Canada to the percentage of married households in America to how many people could die from one pound of finely ground up plutonium to TV density in American households, and the list goes on.

**Conclusion**

All in all, I can say with complete confidence that *Generation X* is a postmodernist novel. There are so many facets of postmodernist literature included in Coupland’s novel that one can point to not only the stylistic operators, but also the characters, the setting and how all of them are presented in conjunction with each other.

It is a very enjoyable novel to read and I find myself laughing on one page only to become very contemplative on the next. Throughout the novel, Coupland is hammering in his points about what he considers to be postmodern society with deadly precision and even though a lot of the characters, especially Dag, are completely surreal, they still serve their purpose to make you think, in this case about how different social constructs determine our behavior and how we perhaps do not really have as much freedom as we might think. To use an expression by Aleid Fokkema, I felt that this book really made me probe my own psyche.
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Appendix A – List of the 19 “bumper stickers” presented in *Generation X* in order of presentation

- USE JETS WHILE YOU STILL CAN
- THE LOVE OF MEAT PREVENTS ANY REAL CHANGE
- SOIL ISN'T A DOCUMENT
- STOP HISTORY
- YOU MUST CHOICE BETWEEN PAIN OR DRUDGERY
- WE'RE BEHAVING LIKE INSECTS
- ECONOMY OF SCALE IS RUINING CHOICE
- EROTICIZE INTELLIGENCE
- BENCH PRESS YOUR I.Q.
- YOU ARE YOUR OWN SEX
- REINVENT THE MIDDLE CLASS
- YOU ARE NOT YOUR EGO
- SIMULATE YOURSELF
- REDUCE DISTILL PURIFY TEACH
- LESS IS A POSSIBILITY
- NOSTALGIA IS A WEAPON
- CONTROL IS NOT CONTROL
- YOU MIGHT NOT COUNT IN THE NEW ORDER
- THE SUN IS NOT YOUR ENEMY
Appendix B – List of the 96 defined neologisms presented in *Generation X* in order of presentation

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<td>Diseases for Kisses (Hyperkarma)</td>
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Anti-victim Device (AVD)
Nutritional Slumming
Tele-parablizing
QFD (Quelle fucking drag)
QFM (Quelle fasion mistake)
Me-ism
Paper Rabies
Bradyism
Black Holes
Black Dens
Strangelove Reproduction
Squires
Poverty Lurks
Pull-the-plug, Slice the pie
Underdogging
2 + 2 = 5-ism
Option Paralysis
Personality Tithe

Jack-and-Jill Party
Down-nesting
Homeowner Envy
Derision Preemption
Green Division
Knee-Jerk Irony
Fame-induced Apathy
Dumpster Clocking
The Tens
Metaphasia
Dorian Graying
Obscurism
Terminal Wanderlust
Cryptotechnophobia
Virgin Runway
Native Aping
Expatriate Solipsism
Emallgratio