

***Attack on Titan*: Freedom between Modernity and Postmodernity**

(Warning: spoilers)

Hajime Isayama's manga *Attack on Titan*, published between 2009 and 2021 and later adapted into an internationally acclaimed anime series, initially appears to follow an almost exemplary narrative of modernity [1]. Humanity is confined within walls, the outside world is unknown, and freedom is something to be achieved through courage, knowledge, and the overcoming of fear. At first, the characters seem to inhabit a perfectly clear conceptual framework: human versus monster, civilization versus external threat, knowledge versus ignorance, freedom versus unfreedom. Yet as the story develops, each of these oppositions begins to collapse. Truth does not ultimately liberate the protagonists; monsters turn out to be human; victims become perpetrators; and the struggle for freedom can culminate in the destruction of someone else's freedom. It is precisely this gradual dismantling of the initially coherent picture of the world that allows *Attack on Titan* to be interpreted as a postmodern work.

Postmodern Discourse: The Collapse of Binary Oppositions

Visually, the world of *Attack on Titan* already resembles a characteristic cultural collage. It combines Northern European architecture, German names, the military aesthetics of the first half of the twentieth century, imagery associated with ghettos and camps, motifs from Norse mythology, and the Japanese tradition of depicting gigantic monsters. Ymir refers to Ymir, the primordial giant of Norse mythology; the cities within the Walls resemble Central Europe; and Marley employs an entire complex of visual codes associated with European totalitarian regimes. Yet the work cannot be reduced to any single historical allegory: its elements are recognizable, but once combined they form an entirely new world.

The postmodern nature of *Attack on Titan*, however, lies not merely in its use of cultural quotation. More important is the way in which the work systematically deprives the viewer of the possibility of understanding its world through stable binary oppositions. Their destruction coincides with two processes at once: the protagonists' maturation and the gradual revelation of the truth about the structure of their world.

The first and most fundamental opposition is **human / monster**. At the beginning, the Titan represents the absolute Other: a gigantic, irrational creature that devours human beings and appears to exist beyond morality and language. Its destruction therefore requires no moral justification. Later, however, it is revealed that Titans are transformed human beings, while several of the main characters themselves possess the ability to become Titans. The boundary between human and monster no longer separates two species; instead, the possibility of monstrosity is discovered within the human being itself.

At the same time, the opposition between **inside / outside** collapses. Initially, geography appears to be moralized: human civilization exists within the Walls, while beyond them lie chaos and death. Going beyond the Wall therefore resembles an Enlightenment gesture—a transition from fear to knowledge. Yet the discovery of the outside world completely changes the meaning of this opposition. Beyond the Walls exists another human civilization. The real boundary no longer lies between humanity and monsters, but between different human communities, each of which regards the other as monstrous.

The opposition between **victim / perpetrator** collapses next. The inhabitants of Paradis are genuinely victims of persecution, yet the Eldians are also descendants of an empire that once subjected other peoples. Marley oppresses the Eldians, but constructs its own political mythology around the memory of former Eldian domination. Reiner is simultaneously a perpetrator who helped destroy Wall Maria and a child transformed by the state into a weapon. Gabi initially seems to be Eren's mirror-image opposite, but gradually it becomes clear that their biographies are structurally almost identical: both are children who witness the destruction of their world, internalize the image of the enemy created by their society, and come to regard revenge as justice.

The oppositions therefore do not simply exchange places. The work demonstrates that **each side already contains within itself precisely what it initially attributes to the Other**.

This is where Jean-François Lyotard's concept of postmodernity becomes particularly productive. Lyotard famously defined the postmodern condition through an incredulity toward "grand narratives"—universal stories that explain the direction of history in terms of progress, emancipation, nationhood, or the triumph of reason [2]. Isayama's world is literally composed of competing grand narratives. The royal government within the Walls erases the population's memories and sustains the myth that the rest of humanity has perished. Marley tells the story of the "devils of the island," whose alleged nature is used to justify the repression of Eldians. Eldian Restorationists construct the opposite narrative of Ymir's great civilization. Finally, the Yeagerists transform Eren into a figure of national salvation. At no point, however, is the viewer given a definitive answer as to which of these narratives should be accepted as the final truth.

This is directly connected to the mechanism of power described by Michel Foucault. Power does not merely prevent people from discovering some pre-existing truth; it participates in the production of knowledge itself, as well as in the categories and identities through which individuals understand the world [3]. In *Attack on Titan*, power repeatedly controls memory—quite literally. The government eliminates or persecutes those who attempt to investigate the outside world. Marleyan Eldians are taught from childhood to understand themselves through the idea of collective guilt, are segregated through armbands, and are confined to designated zones. Warrior candidates are expected not merely to serve Marley but to internalize its version of history.

Francesco-Alessio Ursini argues that the restriction of information constitutes one of the central principles of *Attack on Titan*'s narrative structure: readers learn about the world primarily alongside the characters, so every transformation in the characters' knowledge forces the audience to reinterpret what it has already seen [4]. The form of the narrative therefore reproduces the philosophical problem at the heart of the work. The viewer initially shares the characters' sincere conviction that the Titans represent absolute evil, only to be forced later to acknowledge that this initial judgement was itself the product of a limited perspective.

Another opposition associated with modernity therefore collapses: **truth / falsehood**. The political meaning of a fact emerges only within a particular narrative framework. Ymir can simultaneously be the progenitor of a people, a goddess, a slave, a monster, and a political symbol, depending on who is telling her story.

This structure manifests itself most radically in the opposition between **freedom / slavery**. From childhood, Eren presents freedom as an absolute value. Yet it gradually becomes apparent that the character most obsessed with freedom is also one of the least free characters in the story. His actions are determined by trauma, the history of his people, the memories of previous Titan holders, and his knowledge of a future he has already seen. Freedom turns into necessity: Eren must carry out these events precisely because he already knows that he will carry them out.

Furthermore, the Attack Titan's ability to transmit memories across time destabilizes even the familiar opposition between **cause / effect**. The future influences the past, while Eren simultaneously becomes the consequence of his father's history and the cause of actions his father committed earlier. The linear model of history—past → present → future—ceases to function.

The final opposition to collapse is **liberation / oppression**. Eren's project begins as a demand for freedom for the people of Paradis but culminates in the Rumbling—an attempt to destroy almost the entire outside world. The liberation of one community becomes the absolute deprivation of freedom for everyone else. Freedom itself therefore loses its unambiguously positive meaning.

Garrett Akins interprets this structure through the concept of collective trauma: a new generation does not overcome the violence of the past but reproduces it, transforming the memory of its own victimhood into a justification for new violence [5]. In *Attack on Titan*, however, this mechanism has another dimension: hostile communities not only inherit an image of the enemy but actively produce that enemy through their narratives and actions. For decades, Marley describes the inhabitants of Paradis as “island devils” and as a potential threat to all humanity. This discourse does not remain a mere propaganda fiction: it legitimizes the segregation of Eldians, the transformation of children into military weapons, and the attack on the island. The image of Paradis as absolute evil thus begins to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The islanders eventually discover an outside world in which a significant part of humanity either fears them or is prepared to support their destruction. Eren takes the same logic to its extreme: if Paradis has been reduced by the outside world to a single embodiment of threat, then the outside world itself gradually becomes, in his mind, an equally undifferentiated enemy. In seeking to end the history of his people’s persecution once and for all, he does not escape the model created by his enemies but reproduces it in mirror form and on an apocalyptic scale.

This is precisely why *Attack on Titan* functions so powerfully within contemporary culture. It does not provide the viewer with a ready-made moral conclusion; instead, it forces different audiences to take their own positions. One viewer sees a critique of nationalism, another a story of national liberation; one perceives Eren as a victim of circumstances, another as a fascist leader; for one, the Rumbling is the logical culmination of collective trauma, while for another it is an unacceptable act of genocide. The conflict between interpretations becomes part of the work’s cultural existence. In this sense, viewers do not merely interpret *Attack on Titan*: in choosing among its competing narratives, they inevitably reveal something about their own political and moral coordinates.

What Would a Fully Modern *Attack on Titan* Look Like?

To see the work’s postmodern construction more clearly, we can imagine that the initial model of *Attack on Titan* had never been dismantled. In that case, we would be looking at an almost ideal Enlightenment narrative.

The Walls would represent the limits of human knowledge. Humanity would live in a state of Kantian “immaturity,” accepting explanations imposed by political and religious authorities rather than exercising reason independently [6]. The Survey Corps would become the hero of the Enlightenment: it moves beyond both the physical and intellectual boundaries of what is permitted; Hange transforms superstition about the Titans into an object of experimental investigation; Erwin questions official history; and Grisha Yeager’s basement contains a truth whose discovery should definitively destroy the old myth.

If the work remained entirely within the logic of modernity, knowledge would indeed liberate humanity. The Titans would cease to be demons and become an explicable natural or technological phenomenon. The discovery of truth would allow humanity to organize itself rationally, overcome internal divisions, and eliminate the external threat. The Survey Corps would become the vanguard of progress, Eren a hero of liberation, and history would acquire a clear direction: from myth to knowledge, from fear to mastery of the world, from unfreedom to freedom.

Such a narrative would correspond to the Kantian ideal of Enlightenment: human beings become mature subjects when they dare to use their own reason [6]. Freedom, moreover, must be universalizable: my freedom is legitimate only insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other person [7].

A strictly modern version of the conflict would therefore have to conclude with the creation of some rational and universal order in which knowledge overcomes prejudice and all human beings are recognized as subjects.

Yet this is where the famous problem internal to modernity emerges.

In the twentieth century, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno asked in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* how a project that promised to free humanity from fear through knowledge and reason could nevertheless coexist with fascism, concentration camps, and technologically organized mass extermination [8]. The problem emerges when reason is reduced to instrumental rationality: the ability to select the most efficient means for an already established goal without morally questioning the goal itself. The world becomes an object of calculation, classification, and administration. Whatever once frightened humanity must be identified, brought under control, and ultimately subordinated. Here, the logic of modernity unexpectedly brings us back to *Attack on Titan*.

At the beginning of the story, knowledge of the Titans genuinely liberates humanity from fear. Yet almost every new form of knowledge soon becomes a technology of power. The Titan body becomes a military weapon. The inheritance of Titan power transforms the human being into a resource. The state classifies people according to ancestry. Eldians are assigned designated residential territories and visible markers of identification. Children are evaluated according to their suitability to become Titan holders. Zeke proposes solving a political problem through the controlled termination of an entire people's reproduction. Finally, Eren offers an ultimately rational solution to the problem of the external enemy: if the existence of the Other permanently creates the possibility of threat, the Other can simply be physically eliminated. From this perspective, the Rumbling becomes an almost monstrous caricature of instrumental reason: an absolutely effective means has been found for an absolutely formulated goal.

Zygmunt Bauman likewise argued in *Modernity and the Holocaust* that the mass extermination of the twentieth century cannot be understood solely as humanity's

sudden return to pre-civilized barbarism [9]. It required specifically modern mechanisms: bureaucracy, technical calculation, division of functions, classification of populations, and the transformation of human beings into administrative categories.

In this sense, there is no need to invent a different ending in order to expose the dark side of modernity: *Attack on Titan* itself pushes this logic to its extreme. Reason does defeat myth; humanity discovers the structure of its own world; the Titans cease to be inexplicable monsters, and history ceases to be sacred legend. Yet knowledge does not automatically lead to liberation. On the contrary, it becomes a condition of increasingly efficient administration: administration requires classification, classification divides people into politically and biologically meaningful categories, and this eventually raises the question of which of those categories have any right to exist at all. The Enlightenment movement from fear toward knowledge therefore does not disappear, but turns into its opposite: the world becomes more comprehensible—and precisely because it becomes more comprehensible, it also becomes easier to govern, easier to divide, and easier to destroy efficiently.

It is here that we encounter the possibility of an internal reversal of the modern project, which Horkheimer and Adorno associated with the transformation of emancipatory reason into an instrument of domination [8]. The point is not merely that rationality by itself cannot guarantee freedom. When a universal moral principle gives way entirely to efficiency, the capacity to know, classify, and administer the world can be turned against the human being. In this sense, fascism appears not simply as a return to pre-rational barbarism, but as one possible pathology of modernity: the modern state employs rational organization, bureaucracy, technology, and the classification of populations in the service of policies that are irrational in their ends [9].

In this interpretation, Eren takes to its limit the idea of freedom as the removal of every external constraint. Yet this is precisely where his understanding of freedom diverges from the Kantian ideal of autonomy. For Kant, an autonomous will is not simply one capable of realizing its own desire; it is a will that subjects itself to a moral law capable of universal validity [7]. Eren, by contrast, transforms freedom into a private will elevated to an absolute: the existence of others is accepted only insofar as it does not restrict the freedom of his own people. Eren wants to eliminate dependence on the external world, contingency, fear, and the very possibility of threat. Freedom comes to mean a space in which nothing external can any longer limit his will. Yet such freedom is internally contradictory: the absolute independence of one subject can be achieved only through the disappearance of all other subjects.

Hegelian philosophy makes this contradiction especially clear. Freedom becomes actual not in the isolation of an individual will but through relations of mutual recognition and within social institutions in which the Other is likewise recognized as

a free subject [10]. Eren replaces the problem of recognition with the problem of elimination: instead of attempting to create a world in which the freedom of Paradis could be recognized by others, he seeks to destroy the others themselves. The Rumbling therefore represents a pathological inversion of the modern ideal of freedom: the pursuit of absolute autonomy destroys the very conditions under which freedom can exist as a political and moral relation.

This marks an important boundary between the discourse of modernity and postmodern discourse. From the perspective of modernity, Eren's catastrophe does not yet require abandoning the universal project of freedom itself. His failure could be interpreted as the failure of a false conception of liberation, after which the possibility of another political order remains—one based on law, mutual recognition, and the principle that one person's freedom must be compatible with the freedom of others. Even a tragic ending could therefore preserve a normative horizon: the collapse of one particular attempt at liberation would not abolish the criteria by which that attempt could be judged unjust. History may suffer defeats and deviate from a rational order, but the possibility of a freer and more just organization of the world remains conceivable.

The actual *Attack on Titan* is far less confident in the possibility of such a resolution. The alliance of former enemies does demonstrate that mutual recognition is possible: Marleyans and inhabitants of Paradis are able to see one another not merely as representatives of hostile categories but as individual human beings, and together they stop the destruction of the world. Yet the work does not transform this moment into a final reconciliation. Eren's death does not erase historical memory, national myths, or political conflict; the peace that follows proves temporary, while the final images once again evoke the possibility of war and the repetition of the previous cycle.

The postmodern perspective therefore consists not simply in a critique of the Enlightenment or in demonstrating that a project of liberation can turn into violence. Something more fundamental occurs: once the original picture of the world has been dismantled, the work offers no new privileged position from which all contradictions might finally be resolved. Each new perspective corrects the previous one but remains limited in its own way. This is the postmodern shift: what is called into question is no longer merely the content of a particular "grand narrative," but the very possibility of a final point of view capable of giving history a single meaning and determining its proper conclusion.

No universal form of knowledge emerges that could reconcile the opposing sides once and for all; history acquires no guaranteed direction toward progress; victory over absolute violence does not mean a final victory over the mechanism that produced it. Isayama dismantles the very possibility of a definitive solution. There is no absolute external enemy, because the enemy turns out to be another human being. There is no innocent nation, because the history of every community contains

violence. There is no final historical truth, because memory is constantly produced and rewritten. There is not even a pure liberator, because Eren's pursuit of freedom turns him into the creator of an extreme form of unfreedom. The structure of *Attack on Titan* therefore constitutes a movement from modernity to postmodernity within the work itself. And it is precisely this impossibility of returning to simple answers that makes *Attack on Titan* one of the most expressive works of contemporary culture.

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