

General Introduction to the Postmodern

POSTMODERNISM POSES SERIOUS CHALLENGES to anyone trying to explain its major precepts in a straightforward fashion. For one, we need to make a distinction between postmodern culture and postmodernist theory:



Postmodern Culture or "Postmodernity":

Our current period in history has been called by many the postmodern age (or "postmodernity") and many contemporary critics are understandably interested in making sense of the time in which they live. Although an admirable endeavor, such critics inevitably run into difficulties given the sheer complexity of living in history: we do not yet know which elements in our culture will win out and we do not always recognize the subtle but insistent ways that changes in our society affect our ways of thinking and being in the world. One symptom of the present's complexity is just how divided critics are on the question of postmodern culture, with a number of critics celebrating our liberation and a number of others lamenting our enslavement. In order to keep clear the distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism, each set of modules includes an initial module on how each critic makes sense of our current postmodern age (or "postmodernity").

Postmodern Theory or "Postmodernism":

I will attempt to be consistent in using "postmodernism" to refer to a group of critics who, inspired often by the postmodern culture in which they live, attempt to rethink a number of concepts held dear by Enlightenment humanism and many modernists, including subjectivity, temporality, referentiality, progress, empiricism, and the rule of law. "Postmodernism" also refers to the aesthetic/cultural products that treat and often critique aspects of "postmodernity." The modules introduce some of the important concepts that have been introduced by postmodernist theorists to supplant or temper the values of traditional humanism. Given how the "postmodern" refers to our entire historical period, some of the theorists who have influenced postmodern theory are included not in the Modules but in other sections of this Guide to Theory. Judith Butler's use of the concept of performativity, for example, has been extremely influential on postmodernism but I have chosen to discuss her in the Modules under Gender and Sex. The same may be said about Michel Foucault, who I discuss in the Modules for New Historicism.

Before I turn to a quick overview of the theorists discussed in the Postmodernism Modules, I will begin by offering up a necessarily truncated historical overview in order to situate postmodernity within the major historical movements that have shaped subjectivity in the Western hemisphere over the last four thousand years. In other words, one cannot properly understand our current age without understanding exactly what came before. How can we understand the full force of that "post" without understanding not only the modern but also the premodern?

The Social History of the Western Subject

Oral Culture

Oral Culture:

One way to understand the transformative but largely unnoticed changes effected by new technologies is to think about the way that the printed word changed our way of thinking about the world. That can then help students to start thinking about the ways postmodern technologies (like the computer, the television, film, and mechanical image production) might be subtly but fundamentally changing our way of thinking about the world around us. An exercise I find useful when I introduce orality to students is to ask the question: "What is a tree?" as I did on Aug. 29, 2000 in a class that started with Homer's *Odyssey*. As my students most ably responded on that day, a tree is a plant with bark, branches, and leaves. A taxonomy of different examples was given (ash, oak, etc.), categorized by conifer and deciduous kinds. Photosynthesis and oxygenation were mentioned as important aspects of a tree's life cycle, and then different uses for trees were mentioned (paper, construction, shade, etc.). The class unanimously agreed with this definition. I then explained that studies of those oral cultures that still exist in the former Yugoslavia have asked the same question of non-literate people. Surprisingly, there too the response to the question was, for the most part, unanimous and yet completely different from our own: a tree is like a man whose arms reach up to heaven but whose roots are caught in hell. Why this incredible difference in response? Can we not even agree on an issue as fundamental as the answer to the question: "What is a tree?"

Well, the REASON we, in a literate culture, can all unanimously agree with this definition is that we automatically turn to our communal literate source—the dictionary, which structures our experience of the world through the conventions of science and taxonomy (hence the class' use of such scientific language as "photosynthesis," "conifer," "deciduous," and "oxygenation," terms that clearly suggest that individuals were drawn to language of a different register than quotidian speech). In an oral culture, there is no written source to which people can turn; there are instead

only oral stories. As a result, oral society was different from our own in a number of fundamental ways:

1) no written laws: without a book of rules to establish precedent, justice had to be determined by way of competing accounts and in a case-by-case manner. Examples in the *Odyssey* include the fact that Telemachus and the suitors in Book II must engage in a contest of storytelling before the elders of Ithaca in order to determine who is in the right; another example is how Helen and Meneláus engage in a storytelling contest of sorts in Book IV, with the prize being the very reputation of Helen. In such a society, a leader like Odysseus must have not only martial strength and skill but also a knowledge of common stories (that can be called on as we call on precedent) and also a certain amount of rhetorical guile (which is why Odysseus keeps getting placed in situations where he has no men, weapons, armor, or even clothes).

2) knowledge is based on what is relevant in the present: the stories that are told by rhapsodes change as social situations change. A story about a king who had three sons can, within a few decades, turn into a story about a king who had two sons if the third son's line never continued. By the same token, we can often detect clues of earlier times through story elements that persist even after Greek society was transformed by new technologies. In the *Odyssey*, for example, we can detect layers of archaeology (elements from the bronze age and iron age coexist, for example, as do eating habits from earlier stages in the development of Greek society).

3) no authors: in an oral society, there is no "author" in the modern sense, since stories are passed on for hundreds of years by many generations of rhapsodes. As a result, there is some question about who exactly "Homer" might be, whether the authorship of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* can be attributed to this one figure, and whether the very idea of associating a single figure with these two tales is not a mere fiction. The very idea of authorship and of the ownership of original work are integrally connected to the establishment of literate culture (which allows you to keep *records* of original authorship). Copyright is only possible after copyright, you might say.

4) no private self: subjectivity appears to be directed outward to others and performative situations. Even classical architecture favors an atrium structure oriented to public spaces with no doors and little privacy. Public baths are popular. Some critics have characterized this culture of public-oriented selves "shame culture." In a shame culture, everything occurs, as it were, on the surface of things. Emotions are extreme and public because, as scholars have argued, people in this culture do not have our modern sense of subjectivity or of a private self. What therefore becomes important are questions of honor and shame, which is why, for example, Odysseus must immediately respond to the challenge of Euryalus during the Phaeacian games in Book VIII of the *Odyssey*. Questions of propriety and reputation become paramount, since in an oral society collective memory is only preserved through the stories that others tell about you.

5) no inalienable human rights: Punishment is severe and, ideally, public, in order to illustrate the power and superiority of the punishing authority, eg. Odysseus' extremely

violent and brutal punishment of his unfaithful slaves and of the suitors seeking Penelope's hand. (For the importance of this shift in the idea of punishment, see the New Historicism Module on Foucault and the carceral.) And yet, there is no sense that Odysseus has any "right" to be a leader. He remains a leader only so long as his power of might and his power of words enables him to stay in power. Were he to be defeated and enslaved, the best he could then do is to become a worthy slave (which is why, I think, so much time is spent with Eumaios, himself of aristocratic blood, in Books XIV to XVI). There is also no sense ever that there is any moral wrong in enslaving, raping, or decimating one's defeated enemies.

6) no money: as one of my students, Stacey Morgan, brilliantly put it in that Aug. 29 class, "you could not buy more than you already have." Money, production, consumption and labor could not be understood as abstract quantities that could be bought and sold on the open market (as they are through stocks, bonds, loans, and interest accretion in a transnational economy of limitless investment and speculation). Instead you paid the individual craftsman directly through barter and, thus, through a direct valuation of that laborer's particular product. You are by force closer to, as my student Meg Young-Spillers put it, the "materiality" of the individual's labor. Meg thus used the very terminology employed by Marx in the nineteenth century to critique capitalist culture.

7) gift society: a barter economy often relies on a gift economy for stability. That is, one cements bonds between people through the circulation of gifts. Examples include: a) hospitality: indeed, one is not even supposed to ask the identity of a stranger in the *Odyssey* until after one has showered him with gifts; this act allows for bonds to form even among enemies. It is no mere coincidence that the most powerful God, Zeus, is precisely the God of hospitality; b) women as gifts; that is, they are circulated through marriage and dowry to cement social bonds. This could be done within ruling families (Alcinuous and Arété, for example, are uncle and niece, which allows them to keep power "within the family") or between principalities to escape the threat of war (Alcinuous, for example, offers his daughter, Nausícaa, to Odysseus); c) sacrifice, which could be seen as the religious equivalent or analog of the gift.

Renaissance (1550-1660)



Gustave Doré engraving of Milton's *Paradise Lost*



Renaissance:

In the Renaissance, we witness the beginning of the movement into what some have termed a "guilt culture," although we are still clearly in a transitional period. This transition (including the transition into a monotheistic belief system) is aided by the movement into literate culture; indeed, the Renaissance is also significant because of the introduction of print reproduction (what is sometimes referred to as the Gutenberg revolution, after Johann Gutenberg, who is credited with the invention of the printing press or, more properly, movable type).^{note} When one can write down and then print scripture, as Gutenberg did, the Bible becomes something that achieves the effect of permanence, therefore leading to the belief that one should not change it or even represent it (as the Puritan iconoclasts, for example, believed). The writing down of scripture and then its publication in the vernacular, however, also brings religion to the individual reader. (As a result, the Puritans also opposed the hierarchical organization of Roman Catholicism, particularly the episcopacy [bishops], since they argued that each individual has the ability to access the word of God through the written word without the aid of such intermediaries.)

The Renaissance is also a time of questioning and scientific discovery (acceptance of a Copernican vs. a Ptolemaic universe; advances in the natural sciences; questioning of the literal truth of the Bible); and a time of political revolution, particularly Oliver Cromwell's Republic (ideas circulating, if not implemented, during the Republic included the extension of suffrage; freedom of religion; freedom of the press; a social contract between rulers and ruled). Another significant shift from oral culture is the movement into a monotheistic belief system and, hence, the beginning of the internalization of epic values. A helpful text to think through this transition is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which tends to relegate the values of an oral, polytheistic shame culture to Satan and his cohort. The real epic battle here occurs internally as Eve must struggle against temptation. In a guilt culture, on the other hand, identity suddenly becomes "vertical," existing on a deep scale of internal struggle (think, for example, of the Freudian superego, ego, id model of human subjectivity). In short, the private self is invented. In this post-Christian culture, we are all always already guilty, thanks to the original sin that Milton puts at the center of his monotheistic epic vision. By this same logic, we are also all equal (no one deserves to throw the first stone): slavery, warfare for mere material gain, misogyny, and rape must therefore be seen as morally corrupt. Every person according to this system, no matter how lowly, possesses certain inalienable rights that must never be denied.

One can see elements of this transition in the movement from the Old Testament's "jealous God," Jahweh, to the sacrificing Christ of the New Testament. Indeed, the New Testament at various points must actively rewrite those passages in the Old Testament more evocative of the older shame culture, for example the following lines from Leviticus, Chapter 24:19-21:

19. And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him;
20. Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again.
21. And he that killeth a beast, he shall restore it: and he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death.

Compare that to Matthew, Chapter 5:38-45:

38. Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:
39. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

.....

43. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.
44. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;
45. That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

The same logic of transition can be said to drive the movement from Roman Catholicism's emphasis on public ceremony, church hierarchy, and conspicuous iconography to the Protestant (and especially Puritan) belief that each individual must approach God privately through Biblical reading and self-discipline.

18th Century (1660-1789)



Sir Joshua Reynold's *The Fourth Duke and Duchess* (1778)



Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons*



Christopher Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral (1675-1710)

Restoration/ Enlightenment:

As one name for this period, the Restoration, suggests, this was to a large extent a time of retrenchment. The monarchy in England is restored in 1660, after which the press and some literature is censored just as some religious sects are outlawed. The culture seems to subscribe more to the values of a shame culture rather than a guilt culture (external experience, social reputation, etiquette, and courtliness). Even represented family situations (for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds's painting, *The Fourth Duke and Duchess with their Family*—at left) underlines the formal and performative aspects of what is clearly a *scene* (complete with curtain and stage). Stephen Frears explores this aspect of eighteenth-century society in his film *Dangerous Liaisons*, from which comes the second image on the left. This is the Age of Reason. Hierarchy, convention and the status quo are valued. Neoclassical Architecture tends to be ordered, balanced, symmetrical (eg. Christopher Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral—on the left); however, the emphasis on reason also leads to the precepts of eighteenth-century humanism, which set up the values that facilitate the French Revolution. These values are logical by-products of the move into a guilt culture, as explained in the previous section on the Renaissance. Mary Klages provides a helpful listing of some of these humanist notions in her introduction to postmodernism:

1. There is a **stable, coherent, knowable self**. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal—no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates.
2. This self knows itself and the world through **reason, or rationality**, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form.
3. The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is "**science**," which can provide universal truths about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.

4. The knowledge produced by science is **"truth,"** and **is eternal**.
5. The knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead toward **progress and perfection**. All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.
6. Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true, and therefore of what is right, and what is good (what is legal and what is ethical). Freedom consists of **obedience to the laws** that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.
7. In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right (and the beautiful); there can be **no conflict between what is true and what is right** (etc.).
8. Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. **Science is neutral and objective**; scientists, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased rational capacities, must be free to follow the laws of reason, and not be motivated by other concerns (such as money or power).
9. Language, or the mode of expression used in producing and disseminating knowledge, must be rational also. To be rational, **language must be transparent**; it must function only to represent the real/perceivable world which the rational mind observes. There must be a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them (between signifier and signified).

These are some of the fundamental premises of humanism, or of modernism. They serve—as you can probably tell—to justify and explain virtually all of our social structures and institutions, including democracy, law, science, ethics, and aesthetics.

Romanticism

(1789-1832)



J. M. W. Turner's Snowstorm (exhibited in 1842)



John Martin's The Bard (1817)



Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer in the Mists (1818)



William Blake 's illustration for Gray's *The Progress of Poesy*



Henry Fuseli 's *The Nightmare* (1781)

Romanticism:

This period is marked by a number of revolutions and other transformative changes in society:

The American Revolution begins in 1775; the Declaration of Independence is drafted in 1776.

The French Revolution occurs in 1789, which led (in France) to the execution of the king and also aided the subsequent rise of the middle classes. The fact of the revolution in France led many in England to fear a similar revolution in Britain, either by the middle classes or, worse, the lower classes. The developing madness of King George in England throughout this period did not help in bolstering the image of the aristocracy in the minds of the English.

The rise of the middle classes in England and America. Both countries became increasingly reliant for their wealth on industry and business. This fact also led, of course, to the

rise of capitalism as the predominant way to conceive of business relations. In Britain, this rise culminated in the British Reform Bill of 1832, which extended the vote to the richest members of the middle classes. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the vote would gradually be extended to all men (although the vote would not be extended to women until the twentieth century).

The Industrial Revolution and the related changes occurring in the scientific exploration of the physical world, which increasingly ushered in our modern forms of medicine and science.

Urbanization: as industry became the major money-maker in the nineteenth century and as new machines made farm labour less necessary, people entered the cities in droves to begin working in factories and sweat shops. The resulting pollution led in England to the "London fog," which was really the result of coal pollution mixing with the humidity in the air.

Increasing literacy rates: more and more middle-class men, middle-class women and even lower-class people were learning how to read. This expansion of the reading audience made it possible for our modern mass market to become possible. That is, the book industry could now make a profit by selling inexpensive books to an extremely large number of consumers. This change was made possible by both the increase in literacy rates and the new technologies (Stanhope iron press, Fourdrinier continuous paper-making machine, pulp paper, Plaster-of-Paris method of stereotyping) that made possible the production of cheap books in mass quantities.

Some of the effects of these changes on the idea of the subject include the following: As each individual subject is seen as valued, a new emphasis is placed on internal feelings and inspiration, leading William Wordsworth in his *Prelude* to move epic form away from external battles and inwards towards the formation of an individual subject. The rise of urbanization leads to a counter-reaction: artists begin to extol the value of nature, including sublime landscapes like mountains and oceans that would have been considered forbidding by early-eighteenth-century aestheticians. We are also presented with the formation of the Romantic hero (Promethean, sometimes Satanic, solitary, self-exiled, in search of extremes in nature and the self, tormented by inner guilt). We are now firmly entrenched in guilt culture, which is reflected in the revolutionary changes in politics, ideology, and state institutions. We therefore see the rise of autobiography as a genre (with Wordsworth's *Prelude* as itself a good example). We also begin to see the rise of the novel in this period as an emergent mass market begins to target the newly literate middle classes. Some other elements of Romanticism include:

1) a valuation of originality over convention. J. M. W. Turner's paintings are a good example, since, in paintings like "Snowstorm—Steamboat Off a Harbor's Mouth" (1842)—on the left—he is so far ahead of his time that he is anticipating impressionism by decades. (Although the painting was first exhibited in 1842, Turner is usually associated with Romantic sensibilities.) By many accounts, Turner also pushed himself to achieve such originality of conception. According to his own account, the veracity of which has been questioned, he had himself tied to the mast of a ship on which he was travelling so that he could

see the effect of snow falling about him, which then inspired "Snowstorm." Indeed, Turner's originality often made his contemporary critics balk.

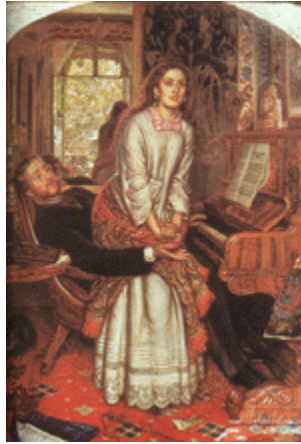
2) a desire to champion the rights of the oppressed, as in, for example, the colonized in Martin's "The Bard" or the poor and destitute in Blake's engraving of Thomas Gray's "The Progress of Poesy"—both on the left. The representation of the poet in both Martin's "The Bard" and Blake's engraving, as a result, underlines the rebellious power of the poet. In Blake's representation, the represented poet-prophet even goes so far as to take on the divine power of God.

3) a new emphasis on individualism, expressed, for example, in the solitude of the individual in Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer" and Martin's "The Bard" (both on the left). Indeed, in Friedrich's painting, we are no longer given a subject on display (with conspicuous signs of that subject's place in the social world) but a nondescript figure. We are made to acknowledge not the subject's social self but the effect of the landscape on the mind of the subject, who does not even turn his face to us. We are thus also invited to take on his point-of-view; we are invited to experience his emotions before the grandeur of the scene before him. There is also a sense here that the subject is noteworthy not because of any social position but because of what he experiences and does (in this case, the achievement of this isolated and dangerous prospect). By this token and thanks to the anonymity of the turned-away subject, we are made to conclude that anyone can achieve the same experience. We are not given the trappings of a particular class or rank but the experiences of a human being. The isolated nature of this figure further serves to underline his individuality, compared to the clear signs of human society in eighteenth-century representations of people and landscape.

4) a desire to abandon oneself to nature, emotion, and the body. The sublime exemplifies this desire to push oneself to the limits of bodily and perceptual endurance in order to experience new and alternate states of being. The use of drugs is another example of this general tendency, best explored perhaps in de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and in Coleridge's Preface to "Kubla Kahn."

5) a degree of irrationality. Indeed, the abandonment of oneself to emotion, mentioned in the previous point, often included the exploration of irrational states of mind, as in, for example, Henry Fuseli's "The Nightmare" (1781). Indeed, de Goya goes so far as to suggest, in his etching, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," that the Age of Reason by necessity includes, perhaps even entails, a shadow side of Unreason. The new valuation of sublime landscapes is similarly an effort to appreciate that in nature which is not utilitarian, not ordered, not balanced, not symmetrical.

Victorian Period (1832-1898)

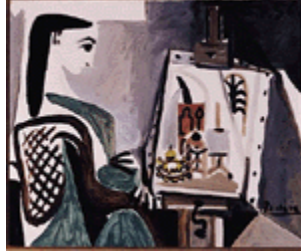


William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853)

Victorian Period:

The increasing rise in literacy rates and the final establishment of the middle class as the dominant ruling class, not to mention the formation of a mass market, help to establish the novel as the middle class' primary artistic form in this period. The Victorian novel in many ways turns away from the exotic experimentation of Romantic poetry and instead offers a critique of Romantic ideals, thus helping to effect a transition into the bourgeois, domestic values of the period (approximately 1832-1898). By implicitly critiquing certain aspects of the Romantic ideology (the search for transcendence, the Romantic hero, the self-exile of the creator, the Promethean myth), a number of domestic novels instead underscore such middle-class values as domesticity, duty, responsibility, work, conservative social reform, empiricism, utilitarianism, and realism. Victorian architecture (particularly the centrality of the hearth and the separation of rooms by hallways) helps to establish spaces where private identity and domesticity can be established. A primary figure of the period is the "Angel in the House," the perfect self-sacrificing and self-disciplining domestic housewife, who is implicitly or explicitly contrasted to the demonic whore-woman. The woman in Hunt's painting, *The Awakening Conscience* (on the left), is poised between these two possibilities for female subjectivity.

Modernism (1898-1945)



Pablo Picasso 's Woman in the Studio (1956)

Modernity and Modernism:

"Modernity" is as slippery a term as "postmodernity"; indeed, some scholars date the "modern subject" as emerging as early as the Renaissance (thanks to the sorts of changes in thinking that I discuss above under "Renaissance"). Usually, though, when someone refers to the "modern period," they mean the period from about 1898 to the second world war. This is a time of wild experimentation in literature, music, art, and even politics. There is still a belief among many thinkers in concepts such as truth and progress; however, the means taken to achieve utopic goals are often extreme. This is the period that saw such revolutionary political movements as fascism, nazism, communism, anarchism, and so on. Indeed, "isms" abound as various groups establish bold manifestos outlining their visions for an improved future. Manifestos about artistic form are just as widespread and, like the political manifestos, often radically different one from the next (eg. surrealism, dadaism, cubism, futurism, expressionism, existentialism, primitivism, minimalism, etc.). In general, this radicalism is driven by a sense that Enlightenment values may be suspect. Modernists therefore participate in a general questioning of all the values held dear by the Victorian period (narrative, referentiality, religion, progress, bourgeois domesticity, capitalism, utilitarianism, decorum, empire, industry, etc.). Many modernists also tend to take the Romantic exploration of the irrational, the primitive, and the unconscious to darker extremes, as in, for example, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, or Antonin Artaud's surrealism. In general, there is a fear that things have gone off track (a feeling exacerbated by World War I) and that we need to follow radically new paths if we are to extricate ourselves. Some of the features of modernist aesthetic work include:

1) self-reflexivity (as in Picasso's *Woman in the Studio* on the left).

2) an exploration of psychological and subjective states, combined sometimes with a rejection of realism or objective representation (as in expressionism or stream-of-consciousness writing).

3) **alternative ways of thinking about representation** (eg. cubism, which attempts to see the same event or object from multiple perspectives at the same time).

4) **radical experimentation in form**, including a breakdown in generic distinction (eg. between poetry and prose, with the French prose poem and the poetic prose of Gertrude Stein or Virginia Woolf as prominent examples).

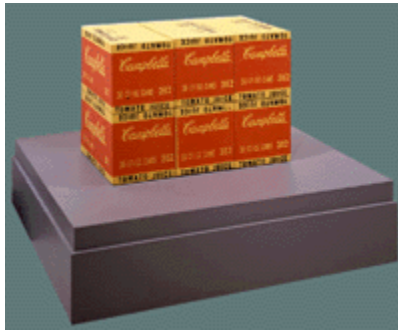
5) **fragmentation in form and representation** (eg. T. S. Eliot's "Waste Land").

6) **extreme ambiguity and simultaneity in structure** (eg. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which offers the same events from radically different focalized perspectives).

7) **some experimentation in the breakdown between high and low forms** (eg. Eliot's and Joyce's inclusion of folk and pop-cultural material in their work), though rarely in a way that is easily understandable by the general masses.

8) **the use of parody and irony** in artistic creation (eg. James Joyce's *Ulysses* or the creations of the surrealists and dadaists), though again in a way that tends to be difficult for the mass consumer to understand.

Postmodernity (1945-present)



Andy Warhol's Campbell's Tomato Soup (1968)



Frank Gehry 's Nationale-Nederlanden Building, Prague (1992-96)



Roy Lichtenstein 's Masterpiece (1962)

Postmodernity and Postmodernism:

One of the problems in dealing with postmodernism is in distinguishing it from modernism. In many ways, postmodern artists and theorists continue the sorts of experimentation that we can also find in modernist works, including the use of self-consciousness, parody, irony, fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, simultaneity, and the breakdown between high and low forms of expression. In this way, postmodern artistic forms can be seen as an extension of modernist experimentation; however, others prefer to represent the move into postmodernism as a more radical break, one that is a result of new ways of representing the world including television, film (especially after the introduction of color and sound), and the computer. Many date postmodernity from the sixties when we witnessed the rise of postmodern architecture; however, some critics prefer to see WWII as the radical break from modernity, since the horrors of nazism (and of other modernist revolutions like communism and Maoism) were made evident at this time. The very term "postmodern" was, in fact, coined in the forties by the historian, Arnold Toynbee.

Some of the things that distinguish postmodern aesthetic work from modernist work are as follows:

1) extreme self-reflexivity. Postmodernists tend to take this even further than the modernists but in a way that tends often to be more playful, even irreverent (as in Lichtenstein's "Masterpiece" on the left). This same self-reflexivity can be found everywhere in pop culture, for example the way the *Scream* series of movies has characters debating the generic rules behind the horror film. In modernism, self-reflexivity tended to be used by "high" artists in difficult works (eg. Picasso's painting above); in postmodernism, self-reflexive strategies can be found in both high art and everything from *Seinfeld* to MTV. In postmodern architecture, this effect is achieved by keeping visible internal structures and engineering elements (pipes, support beams, building materials, etc.). Consider, for example, Frank Gehry's postmodern Nationale-Nederlanden Building, which plays with structural forms but in a decidedly humorous way (which has led to the nickname for the building, Fred and Ginger, since the two structures—clearly male and female—appear to be dancing around the corner).

2) irony and parody. Connected to the former point, is the tendency of postmodern artists, theorists, and culture to be playful or parodic. (Warhol and Lichtenstein are, again, good examples.) Pop culture and media advertising abound with examples; indeed, shows or films will often step outside of mimetic representation altogether in order to parody themselves in mid-stride. See especially the Hutcheon module on parody, which discusses this element in particular.

3) a breakdown between high and low cultural forms. Whereas some modernists experimented with this same breakdown, even the modernists that played with pop forms (eg. Joyce and Eliot) tended to be extremely difficult to follow in their experimentations. Postmodernists by contrast often employ pop and mass-produced objects in more immediately understandable ways, even if their goals are still often complex (eg. Andy Warhol's commentary on mass production and on the commercial aspects of "high" art through the exact reproduction of a set of Campbell's Soup boxes—on the left). We should, however, keep in mind that Warhol is here clearly following in the *modernist* tradition of "ready-mades," initiated by Marcel Duchamp, who used everyday objects in his art exhibits (including, for example, a urinal for his work, *Fountain*) . ([Click here for selected works by Duchamp.](#))

4) retro. Postmodernists and postmodern culture tend to be especially fascinated with styles and fashions from the past, which they will often use completely out of their original context. Postmodern architects for example will juxtapose baroque, medieval, and modern elements in the same room or building. In pop culture, think of the endlessly recycled tv shows of the past that are then given new life on the big screen (*Scooby-Doo*, *Charlie's Angels*, and so on). Jameson and Baudrillard tend to read this tendency as a symptom of our loss of connection with historical temporality.

5) a questioning of grand narratives. Lyotard sees the breakdown of the narratives that formerly legitimized the status quo as an important aspect of the postmodern condition. Of course, modernists also questioned such traditional concepts as law, religion, subjectivity, and nationhood; what appears to distinguish postmodernity is that such questioning is no longer particularly associated with an avant-garde intelligentsia. Postmodern artists will employ pop and mass culture in their critiques and pop culture itself tends to play with traditional concepts of temporality, religion, and subjectivity. Think of the popularity of queer issues in various media forms or the tendency of Madonna videos to question traditional Christianity ("Like a Prayer"), gender divisions ("What It Feels like for a Girl"), capitalism ("Material Girl"), and so on. Whether such pop deconstructions have any teeth is one of the debates raging among postmodern theorists.

6) visuality and the simulacrum vs. temporality. Given the predominance of visual media (tv, film, media advertising, the computer), both postmodern art and postmodern culture gravitate towards visual (often even two-dimensional) forms, as in the "cartoons" of Roy Lichtenstein (example on the right). A good example of this, and of the breakdown between "high" and "low" forms, is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a Pulitzer-prize-winning rendition of Vladek Spiegelman's experiences in the Holocaust, which Art (his son) chooses to present through the medium of comics or what is now commonly referred to as the "graphic novel." Another

symptom of this tendency is a general breakdown in narrative linearity and temporality. Many point to the style of MTV videos as a good example. As a result, Baudrillard and others have argued (for example, through the notion of the simulacrum) that we have lost all connection to reality or history. This theory may help to explain why we are so fascinated with reality television. Pop culture also keeps coming back to the idea that the line separating reality and representation has broken down (*Wag the Dog*, *Dark City*, the *Matrix*, the *Truman Show*, etc.).

7) late capitalism. There is also a general sense that the world has been so taken over by the values of capitalist acquisition that alternatives no longer exist. One symptom of this fear is the predominance of paranoia narratives in pop culture (*Bladerunner*, X-Files, the *Matrix*, *Minority Report*). This fear is, of course, aided by advancements in technology, especially surveillance technology, which creates the sense that we are always being watched.

8) disorientation. MTV culture is, again, sometimes cited as an example as is postmodern architecture, which attempts to disorient the subject entering its space. Another example may be the popularity of films that seek to disorient the viewer completely through the revelation of a truth that changes everything that came before (the *Sixth Sense*, the *Others*, *Unbreakable*, the *Matrix*).

9) secondary orality. Whereas literacy rates had been rising steadily from the introduction of print through the modern period, postmodern society has seen a drastic reversal in this trend as more and more people are now functionally illiterate, relying instead on an influx of oral media sources: tv, film, radio, etc.. The culture still very much relies on print to create these media outlets (hence the term *secondary orality*); however, it is increasingly only a professional, well-educated class that has access to full print- and computer-literacy. An ever larger percentage of the population merely ingests orally the media that is being produced.

POSTMODERN PLAYERS

LINDA HUTCHEON, in her books *The Politics of Postmodernism* and the *Poetics of Postmodernism*, has outlined some of the major aesthetic features of postmodern literature, particularly of what she terms "historiographic metafiction." Her discussion of parody and irony has also been highly influential, helping scholars and students alike think through the value and effectiveness of various postmodern artistic forms. She thus provides a positive spin on the strategies of postmodern works.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD is the sobering critical counter-voice to Hutcheon's theories. Painting a bleak picture of the future, Baudrillard critiques what he sees as the emptying out of all materiality in a culture increasingly governed, he argues, by the postmodern simulacrum.

FREDRIC JAMESON, like Baudrillard, offers a critical view of our present age, in particular the dangers of multi-national capitalism. He also warns against the dangers that result from what he sees as our society's loss of connection with history and with the suffering of the oppressed.