



Postmodern theory makes little sense outside of the associated concepts of modernity and modernism. Unfortunately, there is no consensus about what the pertinent concepts mean. -- Barker, p. 177

“To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.” (Berman, 1982: 15) – Barker, p. 182

The markers of cultural modernism:

- ▶ ambiguity
- ▶ doubt
- ▶ risk
- ▶ continual change

The Dark Side of Modernity

The self-image of modernism is one of:

- ▶ continual excitement
- ▶ the promise of technological and social progress
- ▶ the etching away of tradition in favor of the new
- ▶ urban development
- ▶ the unfolding of the self

However, modernity is marked by:

- ▶ the poverty and squalor of industrial cities
- ▶ two destructive world wars
- ▶ death camps
- ▶ the threat of global annihilation

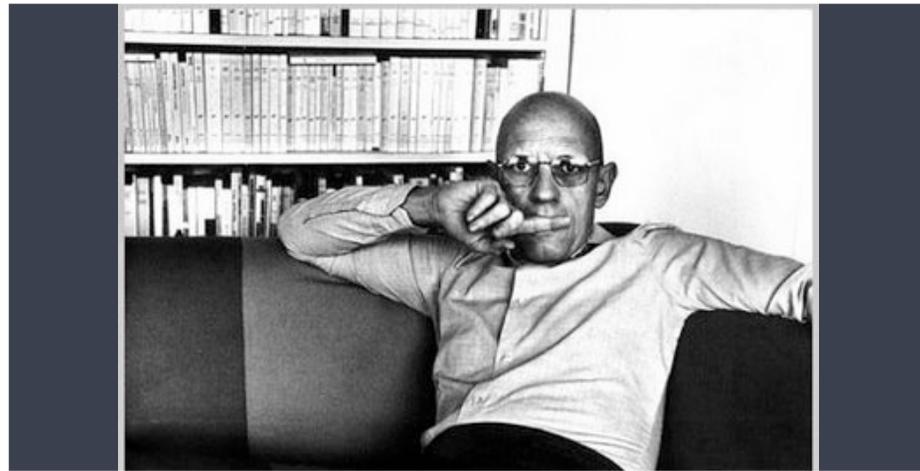
The concept of modernism also carries a narrower focus on the aesthetic forms associated with artistic movements dating from the nineteenth century...It would be better to talk of modernisms rather than modernism. – Barker, p. 185

Modernism rejects the idea that it is possible to represent the 'real' in any straightforward manner. Representation is not an act of mimesis or copying of the real. Rather, it is to be understood as an aesthetic expression or conventionalized construction of the 'real'. In the context of an uncertain and changing world, modernist literature saw its task as finding the means of expression with which to capture the 'deep reality' of the world. Hence the concern with aesthetic self-consciousness, that is, an awareness of the place of form, and particularly language, in the construction of meaning. This is manifested in the experimental approach of aesthetic style characteristic of modernist work that seeks to express depth through fragmentation. – Barker, p. 185

Modernism incorporates the tensions between on the one hand, fragmentation, instability and the ephemeral and, on the other hand, a concern for depth, meaning and universalism. Modernist writers have commonly rejected universalism founded on God. Nevertheless, they have propounded the universals of a humanism grounded in mythic-poetic narratives (which Art has the function of uncovering and constructing). Art replaces God as the foundational narrative of human existence. – Barker, p. 187

[Modernism] deploys non-linear, non-realist modes while retaining the idea of the real. Modernism rejects metaphysical foundations. Nevertheless, it replaces them with narratives of progress and enlightenment which Art functions to illuminate. By Art is meant the work of a high culture demanding reflection and engagement from its audience. Thus, modernism retains the distinction between good and bad art, between popular culture and high culture. Whatever the differences between Lukács, Adorno, Brecht, Godard, Joyce and Einstein, they do share the modern conception that the world is knowable and that true knowledge of it is possible. – Barker, p. 188

Foucault argues that in the transition from one historical era to another, the social world is no longer perceived, described, classified and known in the same way. This is, discourse is discontinuous. It is marked by historical breaks in understanding, changes in the way objects are conceptualized and understood. Different historical eras are marked by different epistemes, or configurations of knowledge, that shape the social practices and social order of particular historical periods. – Barker, p. 192



KEY THINKER: Michel Foucault

A French philosopher and social theorist, he is best known for his critical studies of social institutions including: psychiatry, medicine, and the prison system. He is also well-known for his work on the history of human sexuality. His work on power, knowledge, and discourse have been widely influential in various academic circles. Foucault rejected the poststructuralist and postmodernist labels attributed to him later in his career, instead classifying his thought as a critical history of modernity grounded in Kant.

Key Writings:

Madness and Civilization (1961)
The Order of Things (1966)
Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975)
The History of Sexuality (1984)

Postmodernism as the End of Grand Narratives

For Lyotard, the postmodern condition is not a periodizing concept, that is, the postmodern is not a historical epoch.

For Lyotard, modern knowledge rests on its appeal to metanarratives, that is grand historical stories which claim universal validity. By contrast, the postmodern, in arguing that knowledge is specific to language-games, embraces local, plural and heterogeneous knowledges. The postmodern condition involves a loss of faith in the foundational schemes that have justified the rational, scientific, technological and political projects of the modern world. This is what Lyotard describes as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. By this he means that there remain no viable metanarratives...from which to judge the universal truth of anything. – Barker, pp. 195-196

The End of Epistemology

Epistemology: the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature and scope/limitation of knowledge. It addresses the questions:

- ▶ What is knowledge?
- ▶ How do we acquire knowledge?
- ▶ How do we know what we know?

For postmodernism, no universalizing epistemology is possible because all truth claims are formed within discourse. There are no universal philosophical foundations for human thought or action. All truth is culture-bound. – Barker, p. 196

For some commentators, postmodernism is held to be a form of relativism. That is, truth claims are said to be of equal epistemological status.

Consequently, we are unable to make judgements between forms of knowledge. Gergen embraces the term 'relativism', arguing that truth is/should be an outcome of debates between competing claims.

– Barker, p. 197

Rorty rejects relativism as self-contradictory in favour of the culturally specific character of truth, that which cultural studies would call positionality. He argues that there is no standpoint from which one can see across different forms of knowledge and regard them of equal value. Rather, we are always positioned within acculturated knowledge, so that the true and the good are what we believe. For Rorty, the true and the good are judged in terms of pragmatism, that is, the consequences of adopting certain kinds of understanding. Such judgements can only be made by reference to our values and not to a transcendental truth. – Barker, p. 197

Postmodern Culture

The postmodern does not have to mean postmodernity (as a historical period) but rather indicates a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1979, 1981) and a set of cultural practices. Core to the 'structure of feeling' is:

- ▶ a sense of fragmentary, ambiguous and uncertain nature of living
- ▶ an awareness of the centrality of contingency
- ▶ a recognition of cultural differences
- ▶ an acceleration in the pace of living

The modernist 'regime of signification'

- ▶ prioritizes words over images
- ▶ promulgates a rationalist world view
- ▶ explores the meanings of cultural texts and distances the spectator from the cultural object

By contrast, the postmodern 'figural'

- ▶ is more visual
- ▶ draws from everyday life
- ▶ contests rationalist views of culture
- ▶ immerses the spectator in his/her desire i the cultural object

Postmodern culture is marked by the blurring and collapse of the traditional boundaries between culture and art, high and low culture, commerce and art, culture and commerce. – Barker, p. 202

Bricolage and Intertextuality

Bricolage:

the rearrangement and juxtaposition of previously unconnected signs to produce new codes of meaning. Bricolage as a cultural style is a core element of postmodern culture.

Intertextuality:

the citation of one text within another. Involves explicit allusion to particular programs and oblique references to other genre conventions and styles.

The Aestheticization of Everyday Life

The blurring of cultural boundaries, allied to the prominence of the image, have arguably resulted in an aestheticization of urban life. Featherstone (1991) argues that this takes three critical forms:

- ▶ artistic subcultures which seek to efface the boundaries between art and everyday life
- ▶ the project of turning life into a work of art
- ▶ the flow of signs and images that saturate the fabric of everyday life

Identity projects and the aestheticization of daily life are linked together within consumer culture through the creation of lifestyles centered on the consumption of aesthetic objects and signs. This is linked to a relative shift in importance in society from production to consumption. – Barker, p. 203

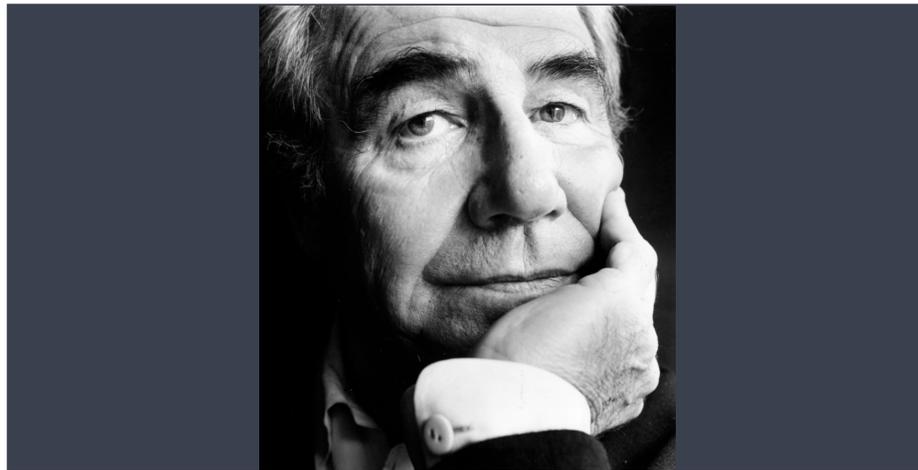
Evaluating Postmodern Culture

Depthless Culture

Here is a culture in which no objects have an 'essential' or 'deep' value. Rather, value is determined through the exchange of symbolic meanings. That is, commodities have sign values that confer prestige and signify social value, status and power. A commodity is not simply an object with use value but a commodity-sign. Signs are said to be able to 'float free' from objects. Consequently, signs are able to be used in a variety of associations (as illustrated every day in television advertising). As Featherstone suggests, 'consumption...must not be understood as the consumption of use-values, a material utility, but primarily as the consumption of signs' (Featherstone, 1991: 85). – Barker, p. 207

Implosions and Simulations

The prefix 'hyper' signifies 'more real than real'. The real is produced according to a model that is not a given but artificially reproduced as real, a real retouched in a 'hallucinatory resemblance' with itself. The real implodes on itself. Implosion in Baudrillard's work describes a process leading to the collapse of boundaries between the real and simulations. This includes the frontier between the media and the social, so that 'TV is the world'. Television simulates real-life situations, not so much to represent the world, but to execute its own. – Barker, p. 208



KEY THINKER: Jean Baudrillard

French sociologist, philosopher, cultural theorist whose philosophy centers on the twin concepts of 'hyperreality' and 'simulation'. These terms refer to the virtual or unreal nature of contemporary culture in an age of mass communication and mass consumption. He believed that we live in a world dominated by simulated experiences and feelings, and have lost the capacity to comprehend reality as it actually exists.

Key writings:

The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures (1970)
For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972)

The Cultural Style of Late Capitalism

For Fredric Jameson (1984), who draws on the work of Baudrillard, postmodernism is implicated in a depthless sense of the present and a loss of historical understanding. We live in a postmodern hyperspace in which we are unable to place ourselves. – Barker, p. 208

The specific manifestations of which include:

- ▶ the cannibalization of styles from past and present
- ▶ the loss of authentic artistic style in favor of pastiche
- ▶ the breakdown of a firm distinction between high and low culture
- ▶ the culture of the simulacrum or copy (for which no original existed)
- ▶ the fashion for nostalgia in which history is the object not of representation but of stylistic connotation
- ▶ the transcending of the capacities of the individual to locate him- or herself perceptually or cognitively in postmodern hyperspace

Pastiche:

A literary, artistic, musical, or architectural work that imitates the style of previous work

Transgressive Postmodernism

Postmodernism is marked by an ironic knowingness because it explores the limitations and conditions of its own knowing. – Barker, p. 210

Chambers (1987, 1990) argues that rather than being the core of a 'depthless culture', commodity-signs are the raw material by which active and meaning-oriented consumers construct multiple identities. Here, consumers are self-conscious bricoleurs selecting elements of material commodities and meaningful signs and arranging them into a personal style. Thus, the postmodern can be read as the democratization of culture and of new individual and political possibilities. Other writers point to the potential of subverting the meaning of signs in consumer culture to enact a form of cultural resistance, for example, through the strategy of culture jamming. – Barker, 210