

Course: Modern Critical Theories

Course Code: Eng-609

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POST MODERNISM:

Blurring Boundaries of Post Modernism with Modernism:

As the boundaries of structuralism and post-structuralism are not clear and there is a lot of confusion regarding the end of one and the start of other similarly there is a great deal of debate about how exactly modernism and postmodernism differ. The two concepts are of different vintage, 'Modernism' being a long-standing category which is of crucial importance in the understanding of twentieth-century culture, whereas the term 'postmodernism', as is well known, has only become current since the 1980s.

Recap of Modernism:

'Modernism' is the name given to the movement which dominated the arts and culture of the first half of the twentieth century. Modernism was that earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature, and architecture. One of the major epicenters of this earthquake seems to have been Vienna, during the period of 1890-1910, but the effects were felt in France, Germany, and Italy and eventually even in Britain, in art movements like Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism.

What is Post Modernism as viewed by J.A Cuddon:

J. A. Cuddon states in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes postmodernism as characterized by '*an eclectic approach, [by a liking for] aleatory writing, [and for] parody and pastiche*'.

Explanation of Cuddon's Definition:

The word '**eclectic**' suggests the use of the fragmented forms which, as we have just said, are characteristic of modernism. (Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for instance, is a collage of juxtaposed, incomplete stories, or fragments of stories.) Also '**aleatory forms**', meaning those which incorporate an element of randomness or chance, were important to the Dadaists of 1917, who, for instance, made poems from sentences plucked randomly from newspapers. The use of

parody and pastiche is clearly related to the abandonment of the divine pretensions of authorship implicit in the omniscient narratorial stance, and this too was a vital element in modernism.

Fragmentation in both Modernism and Post Modernism:

The nature of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is summarized in the excellent joint entry on the two terms in Jeremy Hawthorn's Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory (Edward Arnold, 1992). In both movements fragmentation is present but the nature of fragmentation is different. For the postmodernist, by contrast, fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it.

Tone and Attitude in Modernism and Post Modernism:

In modernism the poem shrinks to narrow columns of two-world lines registering rigorously observed down observation. Postmodernism rejects the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' art which was important in modernism, and believes in excess, in gaudiness, and in 'bad taste' mixtures of qualities which is important in modernism.

Post Modern Literature:

Postmodern literature also often rejects the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' forms of art and literature, as well as the distinctions between different genres and forms of writing and storytelling. Here are some examples of stylistic techniques that are often used in postmodern literature:

- **Pastiche:** The taking of various ideas from previous writings and literary styles and pasting them together to make new styles.
- **Intertextuality:** The acknowledgment of previous literary works within another literary work.
- **Meta Fiction:** The act of writing about writing or making readers aware of the fictional nature of the very fiction they're reading.
- **Temporal Distortion:** The use of non-linear timelines and narrative techniques in a story.
- **Minimalism:** The use of characters and events which are decidedly common and non-exceptional characters.
- **Maximalism:** Disorganized, lengthy, highly detailed writing.
- **Magical Realism:** The introduction of impossible or unrealistic events into a narrative that is otherwise realistic.
- **Faction:** The mixing of actual historical events with fictional events without clearly defining what is factual and what is fictional.
- **Reader Involvement:** Often through direct address to the reader and the open acknowledgment of the fictional nature of the events being described.

Postmodern Philosophy:

Postmodern literature serves as a reaction to the supposed stylistic and ideological limitations of modernist literature and the radical changes the world underwent after the end of World War II. While modernist literary writers often depicted the world as fragmented, troubled and on the edge of disaster, which is best displayed in the stories and novels of such modernist authors as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Albert Camus, Virginia Woolf and Thomas Mann, postmodern authors tend to depict the world as having already undergone countless disasters and being beyond redemption or understanding.

For many postmodern writers, the various disasters that occurred in the last half of the 20th century left a number of writers with a profound sense of paranoia. They also gave them an awareness of the possibility of utter disaster and apocalypse on the horizon. The notion of locating precise meanings and reasons behind any event became seen as impossible.

Main Figures in Post Modernism:

Jiirgen Habermas:

A major 'moment' in the history of postmodernism is the influential paper '*Modernity - an Incomplete Project*' delivered by the contemporary German theorist Jiirgen Habermas in 1980. For Habermas the modern period begins with the Enlightenment, that period of about one hundred years, from the mid seventeenth to the mid- eighteenth century, when a new faith arose in the power of reason to improve human society. Such ideas are expressed or embodied in the philosophy of Kant in Germany, Voltaire and Diderot in France, and Locke and Hume in Britain. In Britain the term 'The Age of Reason' was used (till recently) to designate the same period. The so-called Enlightenment 'project' is the fostering of this belief that a break with tradition, blind habit, and slavish obedience to religious precepts and prohibitions, coupled with the application of reason and logic by the disinterested individual, can bring about a solution to the problems of society.

Young Conservatives:

Derrida and Foucault, represented a specific repudiation of this kind of Enlightenment 'modernity'. They attacked, in his view, the ideals of reason, clarity, truth, and progress, and as they were thereby detached from the quest for justice, he identified them as 'young conservatives'.

JEAN-FRANCOIS LYOTARD:

Jean-Francois Lyotard's **The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge**. Lyotard's essay 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', first published in 1982, added in 1984 as an appendix to *The Postmodern Condition* and included in Brooker's *Modernism/Postmodernism*, 1992, takes up this debate about the Enlightenment, mainly targeting Habermas, in a slightly oblique manner. Lyotard opens with a move which effectively turns the debate into a struggle to demonstrate that one's opponents are the real conservatives. He talks about replacing grand, universal narratives with small local narratives.

Lyotard's Definition of Post Modernism:

Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, that it is, simply, '*incredulity towards metanarratives*'.

JEAN-BAUDRILLARD:

Another major theorist of postmodernism is the contemporary French writer Jean Baudrillard, whose book *Simulations* (1981, translated 1983) marks his entry into this field. Baudrillard is associated with what is usually known as 'the loss of the real', which is the view that in contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV, and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of '**hyperreality**', in which distinctions between these are eroded. His propositions are worked out in his essay 'Simulacra and Simulations' reprinted in abridged form in Brooker, 1992. He begins by evoking a past era of 'fullness', when a sign was a surface indication of an underlying depth or reality

STAGES OF SIGN:

- Firstly, the sign represents a basic reality: let's take as an example of this the representations of the industrial city of Sal-ford in the work of the twentieth-century British artist L. S. Lowry. Mid-century life for working people in such a place was hard, and the paintings have an air of monotony and repetitive-ness - cowed, stick-like figures fill the streets, colors are muted, and the horizon filled with grim factory-like buildings. As signs, then, Lowry's paintings seem to represent the basic reality of the place they depict.
- The second stage for the sign is that it misrepresents or distorts the reality behind it. As an example of this let's take the glamourized representations of cities like Liverpool and Hull in the paintings of the Victorian artist Atkinson Grimshaw. These paintings show the cities at night, wet pavements reflecting the bright lights of dockside shops, the moon emerging from behind clouds, and a forest of ships' masts silhouetted against the sky. Life in these places at that time was presumably grim, too, but the paintings offer a romantic and glamourized image, so the sign can be said to misrepresent what it shows.
- The third stage for the sign is when the sign disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath. To illustrate this, take a device used in the work of the surrealist artist Rene Magritte, where, in the painting, an easel with a painter's canvas on it is shown standing alongside a window: on the canvas in the painting is painted the exterior scene which we can see through the window. But what is shown beyond the window is not reality, against which the painting within the painting can be judged, but simply another sign, another depiction, which has no more authority or reality than the painting within the painting (which is actually a representation of a representation).

- The fourth and last stage for the sign is that it bears no relation to any reality at all. As an illustration of this stage we have simply to imagine a completely abstract painting, which is not representational at all, like one of the great purple mood canvases of Mark Rothko, for instance. I should emphasize that I'm not suggesting that these four paintings are examples of the four stages of the sign, merely that the four stages can be thought of as analogous to the four different ways in which these paintings signify or represent things as basic reality.

Concept of Hyperreality by Baudrillard:

Within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses: everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth; this is the hyperreal in the stance held by Baudrillard.

What postmodernist critics do?

1. They discover postmodernist themes, tendencies, and attitudes within literary works of the twentieth century and explore their implications.
2. They foreground fiction which might be said to exemplify the notion of the 'disappearance of the real', in which shifting postmodern identities are seen, for example, in the mixing of literary genres (the thriller, the detective story, the myth saga, and the realist psychological novel, etc.).
3. They foreground what might be called 'intertextual elements' in literature, such as parody, pastiche, and allusion, in all of which there is a major degree of reference between one text and another, rather than between the text and a safely external reality.
4. They foreground irony.
5. They foreground the element of 'narcissism' in narrative technique, that is, where novels focus on and debate their own ends and processes, and thereby 'de-naturalize' their content.
6. They challenge the distinction between high and low culture, and highlight texts which work as hybrid blends of the two.