

Post-Modernism in History

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Abstract

Postmodernism broadly refers to a socio-cultural and literary theory, a shift in perspective that has manifested in a variety of disciplines including the social sciences, art, architecture, literature, fashion, communications, and technology. Postmodernism can be associated with the power shifts and dehumanization of the post –Second World War era and the onslaught of consumer capitalism. Modernism was an earlier aesthetic movement which was in vogue in the early decades of the 20 the Century. Postmodernism shares many of the features of Modernism. Both schools reject the rigid boundaries between high and low art. Postmodernism's use of lighthearted parody, which was also used by Modernism. Postmodernism refers to a cultural, intellectual or artistic state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle and embodying extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity, interconnectedness or inter preferentiality. Postmodernism questions the specific notions of monolithic universals and encourages fractured, fluid and multiple perspectives. Challenging the social basis of assertions, postmodernist philosophers attack unities seen as being rooted in the Enlightenment philosophy. Postmodernism was originally a reaction to modernism. Modernism made the Enlightenment the pivot of its critical enquiry. So this attack on modernism amounts to an indirect attack on the establishment of modernism itself as a movement that subverts fragmentation and celebrates unity and coherence.

Key Words: Postmodernism, socio-cultural, movement, hierarchy

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").

The growing anti-establishment movements of the 1960s can be identified as the constituting event of postmodernism. It was in the French academia that the theory gained some of its strongest ground in its early development. The Arab-American theorist, Ihab Hassan, is one of the first to use the term in its present sense in his book *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971). In this work, Hassan traces the development of what he calls "literature of silence" through Marquis de Sade, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Samuel Beckett, and a few others, and classifies new genres such as the *Theatre of the Absurd* and the nouveau roman. Richard Rorty enumerates the characteristics of postmodernism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes are also influential in developing and popularizing the postmodern theory in the 1970s. Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have provided the philosophical framework for postmodernism.

Soren Kierkegaard , Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche can be called the precursors to postmodernism. For the postmodernists, the three, with their emphasis on skepticism, especially concerning objective reality, social morals and societal norms, represent a reaction to modernism. Postmodernists often express a profound skepticism regarding the Enlightenment quest to uncover the nature of truth and reality. Modernist authors moved away from the nineteenth century "realist" notion that a novel must "tell a story," from an "objective" and "omniscient" point of view. Instead, they began to embrace subjectivism and fragmentariness in narrative and attempted to bring coherence out of fragments. Modernism, with its belief in the primacy of human reason, values realism in fiction and logical narrative structures.

The term "history" is difficult to explain; it is one of the most complex and problematic term in postmodern theory. In referring to a discourse and the object of that discourse, the term history encapsulates a posited reality and its representation. The problems of the term are not just related to the efforts of historians, but to the issues of representation and reality. Most of the attempts to explain the discourse of history revolve around the question of its representational or narrative. Most of the debates on history focus on the plurality of history

and the strategy problematic of its narrativization. The word “history” refers to two things: narration of past events, and the events themselves. Frederic Jameson exhorts in *The Political Unconscious* “Always historicize!” (9) The process of historicizing of events is a perennial concern for students of literary studies. The relationship between literary writing and historiography has been the subject of debate from Aristotle to the present day. History as a specifically textual concern has entered the domain of literary studies for the past twenty five years. Historicism, in some form or other, has dominated the early development of literary studies until New Criticism turned literary studies towards textual analysis in the 1940’s. According to the New Critics, history is something from which literary analysis need be protected. New Criticism explicitly divorces literary texts from their historical moments of production and condemns contextual or historicist approaches as distractions or “fallacies.”

According to Hayden White, historical work is a verbal artifact. It is a narrative discourse, the content of which is as much imagined or invented as found. He explains this point in the essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”:In general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. (*Tropics of Discourse* 82)

Ewa Domanska’s *Encounters* is a collection of interviews with prominent figures in that broad study generally referred to as historical theory or theory of history. The subtitle is somewhat misleading since philosophy of history, understood in either its Anglo-American analytical sense or its Continental sense, is the concern of neither Domanska nor most of her interviewees. While some of the issues addressed by this volume are broadly philosophical (e.g. the status of truth in historical accounts, the epistemology of historical knowledge, the relation of historical fact to meaning), many are more historiographical, literary, and cultural (e.g. the poetics of written history, history as a cultural practice, the turn to anthropology in historiography). And given the multiple notions of “postmodernity” at work in this volume along with the uncertainty of what it might mean to be “after postmodernism,” perhaps a more accurate subtitle might have been “The Theoretical Conditions of History After Metahistory.” In fact, it is Hayden White’s 1973 volume, *Meta History*, that seems to spell the turning point in historical thought for Domanska.

By the mid 1980s, the version of semiology that Metz developed increasingly lost favour and became largely replaced in film studies debates by an interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This shift is due to a range of factors, including the waning interest in the radical leftist politics espoused by most structuralist thinkers and the emerging interest especially among feminist academics within film studies or in psychoanalysis as a theoretical paradigm. Indeed, Metz himself moved away from his investment in semiology to emphasize psychoanalysis during the mid 1970s.

The cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard also argues that postmodern culture with its rich, exotic media is a world of signs that have made a fundamental break from reality. Our contemporary mass culture experiences a world of simulation having lost the capacity to comprehend an unmediated world. Baudrillard has coined the term simulacra to describe a system of objects in a consumer society distinguished by the existence of multiple copies with no original (166). We experience manufactured realities: carefully edited war footage, meaningless acts of terrorism, and the destruction of cultural values.

It rejects the possibility that we can represent the world in a neutral fashion. It unmasks the deep-seated rhetorical forms and underlying codes that fundamentally shape our realities. Semiotic analysis is a critical skill for media literacy in a postmodern world.

Reference:

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