

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":

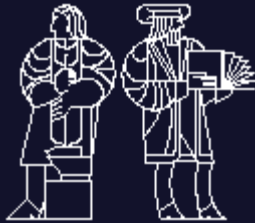
I will attempt to be consistent in using "postmodernism" to refer to a group of critics who, inspired often by the postmodern culture in which they live, attempt to rethink a number of concepts held dear by Enlightenment humanism and many modernists, including subjectivity, temporality, referentiality, 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 copywright, 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 (Alcinous and Arête, for example, are uncle and niece, which allows them to keep power "within the family") or between principalities to escape the threat of war (Alcinous, for example, offers his daughter, Nausicaa, 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*

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 Reynold'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.



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

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)

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.

Victorian Period (1832-1898)

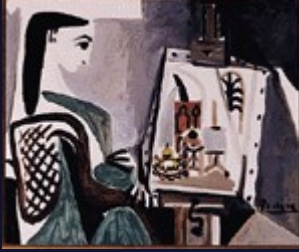


William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853)

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 "Wasteland").

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.

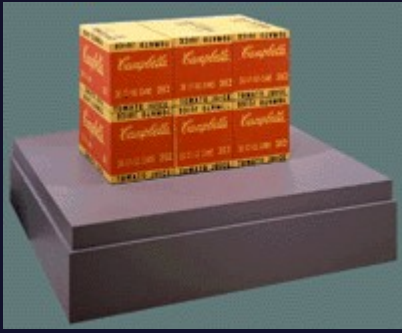
8) the use of parody and irony in artistic creation (eg. James Joyce's *Ulysses* or the creations of the surrealists and dadaists), though again in a way that tends to be difficult for the mass consumer to

Postmodernity (1945-present)

understand.

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



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



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

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



**Roy Lichtenstein 's
Masterpiece (1962)**

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.

LINDA HUTCHEON is very careful to distinguish between postmodernity and postmodernism. The former she understands to mean "the designation of a social and philosophical period or 'condition'" ([Politics 23](#)), specifically the period or "condition" in which we now live. The latter she associates with *cultural* expressions of various sorts, including "architecture, literature, photography, film, painting, video, dance, music" ([Politics 1](#)) and so on. Indeed, Hutcheon diagnoses as one reason why critics have been led to such disparate opinions about the "postmodern" is because of the conflation of these two disparate if associated domains (socio-historical on the one hand, aesthetic on the other hand). By distinguishing between the two domains, Hutcheon offers a critique of Fredric Jameson's influential attack against the postmodern: "The slippage from postmodernity to postmodernism is constant and deliberate in Jameson's work: for him postmodernism *is* the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'" ([Politics 25](#)). Jameson thus sees postmodern art and theory as merely reinforcing the many things he finds distressing in postmodern culture, particularly the conditions of multinational late-capitalism.

Hutcheon does not deny that postmodernity and postmodernism are "inextricably related" ([Politics 26](#)); however, she wants to maintain the possibility that postmodernism's cultural works could be successful in achieving a critical distance from the problems of our contemporary age. On the whole, she agrees with other critics regarding the elements that make up the postmodern condition: a world dominated by the logic of capitalism, which has no regard for the rights of oppressed laborers or the ravagement of the natural world; a society increasingly under the scrutiny of government agencies that insist on casting their disciplining gaze ever deeper into our private lives; an increasing reliance on technologies that separate us from other people and the natural world, thus feeding into our sense of atomism and unease; an emphasis on flat, spatial representations (screens, statistics, ads) that serve to sever us from our former sense of temporality and history; and a culture increasingly dominated by simulacra (computer images, commercial advertising, Hollywood idealizations, commercial mass reproduction, televisuality, and technological replications of all stripes), thus contributing to our sense of separation from the real.

Where Hutcheon departs from critics of postmodernity is by underscoring the ways that postmodern cultural works engage in effective political critiques of the postmodern world around us: "critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it" ([Politics 27](#)). Hutcheon therefore explores a wide variety of

works from various genres and media to illustrate how the cultural works of postmodernism effect their critique of the present.

Some of those strategies postmodernism borrows from modernism, in particular its self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, as well as its questioning of such Enlightenment values as progress, science, and empire or such nineteenth-century values as bourgeois domesticity, capitalism, utilitarianism, and industry. (See the [Introduction to Postmodernism](#) for an outlining of the differences and similarities between modernism and postmodernism.) However, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism does differ from modernism in important ways and that it is this difference from the modernist project that exemplifies the critical potential of postmodern cultural work. For one, Hutcheon points out that postmodern works tends to be critical of "modernism's elitist and sometimes almost totalitarian modes of effecting... 'radical change'—from those of Mies van der Rohe to those of Pound and Eliot, not to mention Céline" ([Politics 27](#)). Hutcheon points out how modernists pursued radical change without acknowledging the price that must be paid by the more extremist positions assumed by modernist authors (e.g., fascism, futurism, primitivism, anarchism, etc.). She also questions how effective elitist modernist projects could ever be as political critique.

If there is one thing that especially distinguishes postmodernism from modernism, according to Hutcheon, it is postmodernism's relation to mass culture. Whereas modernism "defined itself through the exclusion of mass culture and was driven, by its fear of contamination by the consumer culture burgeoning around it, into an elitist and exclusive view of aesthetic formalism and the autonomy of art" ([Politics 28](#)), postmodern works are not afraid to renegotiate "the different possible relations (of complicity and critique) between high and popular forms of culture" ([Politics 28](#)). In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she gives postmodern photography as a perfect example, since it "moves out of the hermeticism and narcissism that is always possible in self-referentiality and into the cultural and social world, a world bombarded daily with photographic images" ([Politics 29](#)). Those contemporary works that are particularly autonomous and auto-referential Hutcheon tends to call "late modernist" ([Politics 27](#)) rather than postmodernist because, as she argues, "These formalist extremes are precisely what are called into question by the historical and social grounding of postmodern fiction and photography" ([Politics 27](#)). The other techniques that Hutcheon associates with postmodern cultural works include: the de-naturalization of the natural (i.e. a refusal to present "what is really constructed meaning as something inherent in that which is being represented" [[Politics 49](#)]); the questioning of the distinction between fiction and history (thus subscribing to the poststructuralist contention that so-called "objective" history is, in fact, just as affected by generic and ideological constructs or the artificial structures of narrative form as is

fiction); ^{note} a rejection of grand narratives (in favor of what Lyotard terms *petits récits* or small narratives—multiple and even contradictory histories rather than "History"); an acknowledgement of the present's influence on our knowledge of the past (for example, the effect of present-day historical [narration](#) on the supposedly "objective" past); a recognition of our reliance on textuality (documents, written histories, etc.) and on the limited perspectives of individuals in understanding the past or even any event in the present; the de-naturalization of gender and sex (feminisms "have made postmodernism think, not just about the body, but about the female body; not just about the female body, but about its desires—and about both as socially and historically constructed through representation" [[Politics 143](#)]). Along with the breakdown between high and low cultural forms, the most important strategy that for Hutcheon distinguishes postmodern aesthetic works from modernist works is parody. (See the next [Hutcheon module on parody](#)). Together such strategies allow postmodern works to maintain a continual and effective critique of postmodernity without, at the same time, ever falling prey to the belief that one can ever *completely* escape complicity with the ideologies that determine our sense of reality in the postmodern condition.

According to LINDA HUTCHEON, one of the main features that distinguishes postmodernism from modernism is the fact that it "takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" ([Politics 1](#)). One way of creating this double or contradictory stance on any statement is the use of parody: citing a convention only to make fun of it. As Hutcheon explains, "Parody—often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality—is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" ([Politics 93](#)). Unlike Jameson, who considers such postmodern parody as a symptom of the age, one way in which we have lost our connection to the past and to effective political critique, Hutcheon argues that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" ([Politics 93](#)). Hutcheon thus sets herself against the prevailing view among many postmodern theorists: "The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images" ([Politics 94](#)). (See the Jameson module on pastiche for a comparison.) Hutcheon insists, instead, that such an ironic stance on representation, genre, and ideology serves to *politicize* representation, illustrating the ways that interpretation is ultimately ideological. Parody de-doxifies, to use a favorite term of Hutcheon's; it unsettles all doxa, all accepted beliefs and ideologies. Rather than see this ironic stance as "some infinite regress into textuality" ([Politics 95](#)), Hutcheon values the resistance in such postmodern works to totalizing

solutions to society's contradictions; she values postmodernism's willingness to question all ideological positions, all claims to ultimate truth.

Such a willingness to play with society's contradictions means that "parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" ([Politics 101](#)); however, this position does not mean that the critique is not effective: postmodern parody "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there" ([Politics 106](#)). Hutcheon at one point likens such an ironic position to the convention of the inverted comma:

It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or "highlight," and to subvert, or "subvert," and the mode is therefore a "knowing" and an ironic—or even "ironic"—one. Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale "nudging" commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as "natural" (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact "cultural"; made by us, not given to us. ([Politics 1-2](#)).

Through such an ironic play with society's contradictions, postmodern parody forces us to question a number of other traditional assumptions about the aesthetic product: 1) the notion of artistic originality and the cult of personality that surrounds the artist; 2) the assumption that subjectivity is stable, coherent, or self-determining; 3) the capitalist principles of ownership and property; 4) all contentions that meaning or identity is natural rather than artificial; 5) the belief that one can know history the way it really was (to echo a famous formulation of the German historian, Leopold von Ranke); 6) the belief that there is such a thing as a neutral or non-ideological position; and 7) the claim that one can secure an autonomous yet still effective realm for the aesthetic product, separate from either a mass audience or the mass market.

In such critiques, postmodern parody resembles modernist parody, which, Hutcheon acknowledges, can be found "in the writing of T. S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce and the painting of Picasso, Manet, and Magritte" ([Politics 99](#)). What postmodernist parody questions, however, is the "Unacknowledged modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation" ([Politics 99](#)). It is more willing to break down distinctions between "reality" and "fiction," as in such disparate works as Christa Wolf's *No Place on Earth*, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Timothy Findlay's *Famous Last Words*, and Woody

Allen's *Zelig* (a postmodern generic trait that Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction"). It is also more willing to incorporate mass-market forms in its critique, with photography and film serving as two especially noteworthy examples. As Hutcheon puts it, "Postmodernism is both academic and popular, élitist and accessible" ([Poetics 44](#)). It is thanks to such contradictions that postmodernism can mount a successful critique. Whereas Jameson condemns all Hollywood film as contributing to the problems of late capitalism, Hutcheon offers another way of valuing such work: "Postmodern film does not deny that it is implicated in capitalist modes of production, because it knows it cannot. Instead it exploits its 'insider' position in order to begin a subversion from within, to talk to consumers in a capitalist society in a way that will get us where we live, so to speak" ([Politics 114](#)).

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JEAN BAUDRILLARD has proven to be an important influence on postmodern theorists and artists, making his presence felt from Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* to the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*. Like Jameson, Baudrillard paints a rather bleak picture of our current postmodern condition, arguing that we have lost contact with the "real" in various ways, that we have nothing left but a continuing fascination with its disappearance. His vision is highly [dystopic](#). In Baudrillard's version of postmodernity, there is hardly any space for opposition or resistance because of the supreme [hegemony](#) of the controlling system: "Everywhere, always, the system is too strong: [hegemonic](#)" ("[On Nihilism](#)" 163).. Baudrillard's vision, then, is one of supreme nihilism and melancholia: "Melancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning.... And we are all melancholic" ("[On Nihilism](#)" 162). The problem is that "The system is itself also nihilistic, in the sense that it has the power to pour everything, including what denies it, into indifference" ("[On Nihilism](#)" 163). When reading Baudrillard on postmodernity, one sometimes gets the sense that we have already lost, that Baudrillard is merely pointing out the various ways that consumer society and the [simulacrum](#) have won in their colonization of all "reality." (On the "simulacrum," see the [next module on simulation](#).)

Baudrillard points to a number of factors contributing to humanity's death knell within the postmodern present, including:

1) the loss of history. As Baudrillard puts it in "History: A Retro Scenario," "History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth." He goes on to say that "The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation" ([43](#)).

2) mediatization. The fact that movies and television (the media) keep turning to history and to various "retro" recreations of the past is merely a symptom (a [reaction-formation](#), Freud would say) for the loss of history. Indeed, such media works continue the process of forgetting history; as Baudrillard writes of the NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, "One no longer makes the Jews pass through the crematorium or the gas chamber, but through the sound track and image track, through the

universal screen and the microprocessor. Forgetting, annihilation, finally achieves its aesthetic dimension in this way—it is achieved in retro, finally elevated here to a mass level" (["Holocaust" 49](#)). Television, film, and the internet separate us from the real even as they seek to reproduce it more fully or faithfully: "The hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than real, that is how the real is abolished" (["The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" 81](#)).

3) the proliferation of kitsch: Our culture, according to Baudrillard, has been inundated by trashy, kitsch, mass-market products, which contribute to our society of simulation and consumerism: "This proliferation of [kitsch](#), which is produced by industrial reproduction and the vulgarization at the level of objects of distinctive signs taken from all registers (the bygone, the 'neo', the exotic, the folksy, the futuristic) and from a disordered excess of 'ready-made' signs, has its basis, like 'mass culture', in the sociological reality of the consumer society" ([Consumer Society 110](#))

4) consumer society. A culture of consumption has so much taken over our ways of thinking that all reality is filtered through the logic of exchange value and advertising. As Baudrillard writes, "Our society thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes *itself* as consumer society, as *idea*. Advertising is the triumphal paean to that idea" ([Consumer Society 193](#)).

5) the "cool smile". Like Jameson, Baudrillard argues that the parodic, self-conscious, self-reflexive elements of pop-cultural forms only aid in their capitalist complicity: "This false distance is present everywhere: in spy films, in Godard, in modern advertising, which uses it continually as a cultural allusion. It is not really clear in the end whether this 'cool' smile is the smile of humour or that of commercial complicity. This is also the case with pop, and its smile ultimately encapsulates all its ambiguity: it is not the smile of critical distance, but the smile of *collusion*" ([Consumer Society 121](#)). For comparison, see the [Jameson module on pastiche](#) and the [Hutcheon module on parody](#).

6) simulacra and simulation. Above all else, Baudrillard keeps returning to his concepts, simulacra and simulation, to explain how our models for the real have taken over the place of the real in postmodern society. See [the next module](#).

ACCORDING TO BAUDRILLARD, what has happened in postmodern culture is that our society has become so reliant on models and maps that we have lost all contact with the real world that preceded the map. Reality itself has begun merely to

imitate the model, which now precedes and determines the real world: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory" ("[The Precession of Simulacra](#)" 1). According to Baudrillard, when it comes to postmodern simulation and simulacra, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" ("[The Precession of Simulacra](#)" 2). Baudrillard is not merely suggesting that postmodern culture is artificial, because the concept of artificiality still requires some sense of reality against which to recognize the artifice. His point, rather, is that we have lost all ability to make sense of the distinction between nature and artifice. To clarify his point, he argues that there are three "orders of simulacra": 1) in the first order of simulacra, which he associates with the pre-modern period, the image is a clear counterfeit of the real; the image is recognized as just an illusion, a place marker for the real; 2) in the second order of simulacra, which Baudrillard associates with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, the distinctions between the image and the representation begin to break down because of mass production and the proliferation of copies. Such production misrepresents and masks an underlying reality by imitating it so well, thus threatening to replace it (e.g. in photography or ideology); however, there is still a belief that, through critique or effective political action, one can still access the hidden fact of the real; 3) in the third order of simulacra, which is associated with the postmodern age, we are confronted with a *precession* of simulacra; that is, the representation *precedes* and *determines* the real. There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation; there is only the simulacrum.

Baudrillard points to a number of phenomena to explain this loss of distinctions between "reality" and the simulacrum:

1) Media culture. Contemporary media (television, film, magazines, billboards, the Internet) are concerned not just with relaying information or stories but with interpreting our most private selves for us, making us approach each other and the world through the lens of these media images. We therefore no longer acquire goods because of real needs but because of desires that are increasingly defined by commercials and commercialized images, which keep us at one step removed from the reality of our bodies or of the world around us.

2) Exchange-Value. According to Karl Marx, the entrance into capitalist culture meant that we ceased to think of purchased goods in terms of use-value, in terms of the real uses to which an item will be put. Instead, everything began to be translated into how much it is worth, into what it can be exchanged for (its exchange-value). Once money became a "universal equivalent," against which everything in our lives is

measured, things lost their material reality (real-world uses, the sweat and tears of the laborer). We began even to think of our own lives in terms of money rather than in terms of the real things we hold in our hands: how much is my time worth? How does my conspicuous consumption define me as a person? According to Baudrillard, in the postmodern age, we have lost all sense of use-value: "It is all capital" ([*For a Critique* 82](#)).

3) Multinational capitalism. As the things we use are increasingly the product of complex industrial processes, we lose touch with the underlying reality of the goods we consume. Not even national identity functions in a world of multinational corporations. According to Baudrillard, it is capital that now defines our identities. We thus continue to lose touch with the material fact of the laborer, who is increasingly invisible to a consumer oriented towards retail outlets or the even more impersonal Internet. A common example of this is the fact that most consumers do not know how the products they consume are related to real-life things. How many people could identify the actual plant from which is derived the coffee bean? Starbucks, by contrast, increasingly defines our urban realities. (On multinational capitalism, see [Marxism: Modules: Jameson: Late Capitalism](#).)

4) Urbanization. As we continue to develop available geographical locations, we lose touch with any sense of the natural world. Even natural spaces are now understood as "protected," which is to say that they are defined in contradistinction to an urban "reality," often with signs to point out just how "real" they are. Increasingly, we expect the sign (behold nature!) to precede access to nature.

5) Language and Ideology. Baudrillard illustrates how in such subtle ways language keeps us from accessing "reality." The earlier understanding of ideology was that it hid the truth, that it represented a "false consciousness," as Marxists phrase it, keeping us from seeing the real workings of the state, of economic forces, or of the dominant groups in power. (This understanding of ideology corresponds to Baudrillard's second order of simulacra.) Postmodernism, on the other hand, understands ideology as the support for our very perception of reality. There is no outside of ideology, according to this view, at least no outside that can be articulated in language. Because we are so reliant on language to structure our perceptions, any representation of reality is always already ideological, always already constructed by simulacra.