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Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed

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Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s. Postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. It's hard to locate it temporally or historically, because it's not clear exactly when postmodernism begins. Perhaps the easiest way to start thinking about postmodernism is by thinking about modernism, the movement from which postmodernism seems to grow or emerge. Modernism has two facets, or two modes of definition, both of which are relevant to understanding postmodernism.

The first facet or definition of modernism comes from the aesthetic movement broadly labeled "modernism." This movement is roughly coterminous with twentieth century Western ideas about art (though traces of it in emergent forms can be found in the nineteenth century as well). Modernism, as you probably know, is the movement in visual arts, music, literature, and drama which rejected the old Victorian standards of how art should be made, consumed, and what it should mean. In the period of "high modernism," from around 1910 to 1930, the major figures of modernism literature helped radically to redefine what poetry and fiction could be and do: figures like Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Proust, Mallarme, Kafka, and Rilke are considered the founders of twentieth-century modernism.

From a literary perspective, the main characteristics of modernism include:

1. an emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity in writing (and in visual arts as well); an emphasis on HOW seeing (or reading or perception itself) takes place, rather than on WHAT is perceived. An example of this would be stream-of-consciousness writing.
2. a movement away from the apparent objectivity provided by omniscient third-person narrators, fixed narrative points of view, and clear-cut moral positions. Faulkner's multiply-narrated stories are an example of this aspect of modernism.
3. a blurring of distinctions between genres, so that poetry seems more documentary (as in T.S. Eliot or ee cummings) and prose seems more poetic (as in Woolf or Joyce).
4. an emphasis on fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random-seeming collages of different materials.
5. a tendency toward reflexivity, or self-consciousness, about the production of the work of art, so that each piece calls attention to its own status as a production, as something constructed and consumed in particular ways.
6. a rejection of elaborate formal aesthetics in favor of minimalist designs (as in the poetry of William Carlos Williams) and a rejection, in large part, of formal aesthetic theories, in favor of spontaneity and discovery in creation.
7. A rejection of the distinction between "high" and "low" or popular culture, both in choice of materials used to produce art and in methods of displaying, distributing, and consuming art.

Postmodernism, like modernism, follows most of these same ideas, rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness. Postmodern art (and thought) favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject.

But--while postmodernism seems very much like modernism in these ways, it differs from modernism in its attitude toward a lot of these trends. Modernism, for example, tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history (think of *The Wasteland*, for instance, or of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), but presents that fragmentation as something tragic, something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Many modernist works try to uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which has been lost in most of modern life; art will do what other human institutions fail to do. Postmodernism, in contrast, doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense.

Another way of looking at the relation between modernism and postmodernism helps to clarify some of these distinctions. According to Frederic Jameson, modernism and postmodernism are cultural formations which accompany particular stages of capitalism. Jameson outlines three primary phases of capitalism which dictate particular cultural practices (including what kind of art and literature is produced). The first is market capitalism, which occurred in the eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries in Western Europe, England, and the United States (and all their spheres of influence). This first phase is associated with particular technological developments, namely, the steam-driven motor, and with a particular kind of aesthetics, namely, realism. The second phase occurred from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century (about WWII); this phase, monopoly capitalism, is associated with electric and internal combustion motors, and with modernism. The third, the phase we're in now, is multinational or consumer capitalism (with the emphasis placed on marketing, selling, and consuming commodities, not on producing them), associated with nuclear and electronic technologies, and correlated with postmodernism.

Like Jameson's characterization of postmodernism in terms of modes of production and technologies, the second facet, or definition, of postmodernism comes more from history and sociology than from literature or art history. This approach defines postmodernism as the name of an entire social formation, or set of social/historical attitudes; more precisely, this approach contrasts "postmodernity" with "modernity," rather than "postmodernism" with "modernism."

What's the difference? "Modernism" generally refers to the broad aesthetic movements of the twentieth century; "modernity" refers to a set of philosophical, political, and ethical ideas which provide the basis for the aesthetic aspect of modernism. "Modernity" is older than "modernism;" the label "modern," first articulated in nineteenth-century sociology, was meant to distinguish the present era from the previous one, which was labeled "antiquity." Scholars are always debating when exactly the "modern" period began, and how to distinguish between what is modern and what is not modern; it seems like the modern period starts earlier and earlier every time historians look at it. But generally, the "modern" era is associated with the European Enlightenment, which begins roughly in the middle of the

eighteenth century. (Other historians trace elements of enlightenment thought back to the Renaissance or earlier, and one could argue that Enlightenment thinking begins with the eighteenth century. I usually date "modern" from 1750, if only because I got my Ph.D. from a program at Stanford called "Modern Thought and Literature," and that program focused on works written after 1750).

The basic ideas of the Enlightenment are roughly the same as the basic ideas of humanism. Jane Flax's article gives a good summary of these ideas or premises (on p. 41). I'll add a few things to her list.

1. There is a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal--no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates.
2. This self knows itself and the world through reason, or rationality, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form.
3. The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is "science," which can provide universal truths about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.
4. The knowledge produced by science is "truth," and is eternal.
5. The knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead toward progress and perfection. All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.
6. Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true, and therefore of what is right, and what is good (what is legal and what is ethical). Freedom consists of obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.
7. In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right (and the beautiful); there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right (etc.).
8. Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. Science is neutral and objective; scientists, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased rational capacities, must be free to follow the laws of reason, and not be motivated by other concerns (such as money or power).
9. Language, or the mode of expression used in producing and disseminating knowledge, must be rational also. To be rational, language must be transparent; it must function only to represent the real/perceivable world which the rational mind observes. There must be a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them (between signifier and signified).

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

Modernity is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function (the more rationally it will function). Because modernity is about the pursuit of ever-increasing levels of order, modern societies constantly are on guard against anything and everything labeled as "disorder," which might disrupt order. Thus modern societies rely on continually establishing a binary opposition between "order" and "disorder," so that they can assert the superiority of "order." But to do this, they have to have things that represent "disorder"--modern societies thus continually have to create/construct "disorder." In western culture, this disorder becomes "the other"--defined in relation to other binary oppositions. Thus anything non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, non-hygienic, non-rational, (etc.) becomes part of "disorder," and has to be eliminated from the ordered, rational modern society.

The ways that modern societies go about creating categories labeled as "order" or "disorder" have to do with the effort to achieve stability. Francois Lyotard (the theorist whose works Sarup describes in his article on postmodernism) equates that stability with the idea of "totality," or a totalized system (think here of Derrida's idea of "totality" as the wholeness or completeness of a system). Totality, and stability, and order, Lyotard argues, are maintained in modern societies through the means of "grand narratives" or "master narratives," which are stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs. A "grand narrative" in American culture might be the story that democracy is the most enlightened (rational) form of government, and that democracy can and will lead to universal human happiness. Every belief system or ideology has its grand narratives, according to Lyotard; for Marxism, for instance, the "grand narrative" is the idea that capitalism will collapse in on itself and a utopian socialist world will evolve. You might think of grand narratives as a kind of meta-theory, or meta-ideology, that is, an ideology that explains an ideology (as with Marxism); a story that is told to explain the belief systems that exist.

Lyotard argues that all aspects of modern societies, including science as the primary form of knowledge, depend on these grand narratives. Postmodernism then is the critique of grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice. In other words, every attempt to create "order" always demands the creation of an equal amount of "disorder," but a "grand narrative" masks the constructedness of these categories by explaining that "disorder" REALLY IS chaotic and bad, and that "order" REALLY IS rational and good. Postmodernism, in rejecting grand narratives, favors "mini-narratives," stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern "mini-narratives" are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.

Another aspect of Enlightenment thought--the final of my 9 points--is the idea that language is transparent, that words serve only as representations of thoughts or things, and don't have any function beyond that. Modern societies depend on the idea that signifiers always point to signifieds, and that reality resides in signifieds. In postmodernism, however, there are only signifiers. The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears, and with it the idea of signifieds that signifiers point to. Rather, for postmodern societies, there are only surfaces, without depth; only signifiers, with no signifieds.

Another way of saying this, according to Jean Baudrillard, is that in postmodern society there are no originals, only copies--or what he calls "simulacra." You might think, for example, about painting or sculpture, where there is an original work (by Van Gogh, for instance), and there might also be thousands of copies, but the original is the one with the highest value (particularly monetary value). Contrast that with cds or music recordings, where there is no "original," as in painting--no recording that is hung on a wall, or kept in a vault; rather, there are only copies, by the millions, that are all the same, and all sold for (approximately) the same amount of money. Another version of Baudrillard's "simulacrum" would be the concept of virtual reality, a reality created by simulation, for which there is no original. This is particularly evident in computer games/simulations--think of Sim City, Sim Ant, etc. Finally, postmodernism is concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge. In modern societies, knowledge was equated with science, and was contrasted to narrative; science was good knowledge, and narrative was bad, primitive, irrational (and thus associated with women, children, primitives, and insane people). Knowledge, however, was good for its

own sake; one gained knowledge, via education, in order to be knowledgeable in general, to become an educated person. This is the ideal of the liberal arts education. In a postmodern society, however, knowledge becomes functional--you learn things, not to know them, but to use that knowledge. As Sarup points out (p. 138), educational policy today puts emphasis on skills and training, rather than on a vague humanist ideal of education in general. This is particularly acute for English majors. "What will you DO with your degree?"

Not only is knowledge in postmodern societies characterized by its utility, but knowledge is also distributed, stored, and arranged differently in postmodern societies than in modern ones. Specifically, the advent of electronic computer technologies has revolutionized the modes of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption in our society (indeed, some might argue that postmodernism is best described by, and correlated with, the emergence of computer technology, starting in the 1960s, as the dominant force in all aspects of social life). In postmodern societies, anything which is not able to be translated into a form recognizable and storable by a computer--i.e. anything that's not digitizable--will cease to be knowledge. In this paradigm, the opposite of "knowledge" is not "ignorance," as it is the modern/humanist paradigm, but rather "noise." Anything that doesn't qualify as a kind of knowledge is "noise," is something that is not recognizable as anything within this system.

Liotard says (and this is what Sarup spends a lot of time explaining) that the important question for postmodern societies is who decides what knowledge is (and what "noise" is), and who knows what needs to be decided. Such decisions about knowledge don't involve the old modern/humanist qualifications: for example, to assess knowledge as truth (its technical quality), or as goodness or justice (its ethical quality) or as beauty (its aesthetic quality). Rather, Lyotard argues, knowledge follows the paradigm of a language game, as laid out by Wittgenstein. I won't go into the details of Wittgenstein's ideas of language games; Sarup gives a pretty good explanation of this concept in his article, for those who are interested. There are lots of questions to be asked about postmodernism, and one of the most important is about the politics involved--or, more simply, is this movement toward fragmentation, provisionality, performance, and instability something good or something bad? There are various answers to that; in our contemporary society, however, the desire to return to the pre-postmodern era (modern/humanist/Enlightenment thinking) tends to get associated with conservative political, religious, and philosophical groups. In fact, one of the consequences of postmodernism seems to be the rise of religious fundamentalism, as a form of resistance to the questioning of the "grand narratives" of religious truth. This is perhaps most obvious (to us in the US, anyway) in muslim fundamentalism in the Middle East, which ban postmodern books--like Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses --because they deconstruct such grand narratives.

This association between the rejection of postmodernism and conservatism or fundamentalism may explain in part why the postmodern avowal of fragmentation and multiplicity tends to attract liberals and radicals. This is why, in part, feminist theorists have found postmodernism so attractive, as Sarup, Flax, and Butler all point out.

On another level, however, postmodernism seems to offer some alternatives to joining the global culture of consumption, where commodities and forms of knowledge are offered by forces far beyond any individual's control. These alternatives focus on thinking of any and all action (or social struggle) as necessarily local, limited, and partial--but nonetheless effective. By discarding "grand narratives" (like the liberation of the entire working class) and focusing on specific local goals (such as improved day care centers for working mothers in your own

community), postmodernist politics offers a way to theorize local situations as fluid and unpredictable, though influenced by global trends. Hence the motto for postmodern politics might well be "think globally, act locally"--and don't worry about any grand scheme or master plan.

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The Flax article referred to is Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, 1990.

The Sarup article referred to is Chapter 6, "Lyotard and Postmodernism," in Madan Sarup's *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, University of Georgia Press, 1993.

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