Some Common Themes and Ideas within the Field of Postmodern Thought: A Handout for HIS 389

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There are basically three ways that people use the term "postmodernism":

- first, to describe a specific era, sometimes dated from the end of World War II but more frequently starting as late as the 1970s;

- second, to describe a body of philosophical ideas and critical studies that date back to the late 1960s with such poststructuralist thinkers as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, but then in the 1970s and 1980s comes to include a whole series of different analyses involving language and symbolic systems that utilizes some of the insights of these earlier poststructuralist thinkers;[1]

- and, finally, a whole body of different artistic works that makes reference to or embodies the ideas promoted by the above thinkers.

In the first sense, postmodernism is often used as synonymous with "the postindustrial age" in Daniel Bell's sense or "the late capitalist age" in Frederick Jameson's. It generally refers to a shift away from traditional factory production towards a more service-oriented economy; the growing importance of information technology and media; the explosion of consumer and advertising activity; and the appearance of nuclear power as an energy source and world threat. Frequently, though, people who tend to talk about a "postmodern age" are <u>not</u> postmodernist themselves, at least in the second sense of the word; in other words, they generally try to trace back the development of the ideas and themes that will be discussed below to social or economic changes, and thus see them as simply an ideological manifestation (in at least a vaguely Marxist sense) of the late capitalist era. The two exceptions to this would be late Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard, who both are postmodern theorists who theorize at the same time about the postmodern age.

In the rest of this handout, we will look at postmodernism in the second and third senses of the words. I will do this by tracing out some themes that help to circumscribe the field of postmodernism, both within the realm of ideas and in the realm of the arts.

From the beginning, I should make it clear, though, that postmodernism is not a single, monolithic body of ideas. Postmodernism means something a little different for every

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[1] Though postmodernism as a body of thought is conventionally traced back to the late 1960s, we might point out that there are a number of earlier philosophers whose ideas could easily be described as postmodernist, including the Friedrich Nietzsche, the American pragmatists William James and Charles Pierce, and to a lesser extent the German phenomenologists Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

area of the arts or every specific field of knowledge that we look at. Still, there are some themes and ideas common to many of these areas that can serve as "family characteristics" (in Wittgenstein's sense), that is as kinds of interlocking set of similarities that allow us to identify the field in a vague way, but without necessarily defining it in any definitive way.

1. **The rejection of ultimate sources of meaning and truth**. Many philosophers and literary theorists of the twentieth century have come to doubt that meaning and truth can be traced to any ultimate sources, whether this is "reality" in a material/naturalistic sense or an internal subject/ego in a Freudian or phenomenological sense. Truth is either interpreted as a kind of effect of larger systems of knowledge and language (or discourse, as it more commonly is called) or it is interpreted in a pragmatic sense as what simply works at any particular moment. In both cases, knowledge is seen as a system (or more commonly a set of systems) that are free-floating—they have no foundation, no correspondence with any absolute reality.

2. **The death of "depth models" and the embrace of "the surface."** Since many postmodernists[2] have rejected ultimate sources of truth, they also have thrown out the "depth models" that have previously structured most Westernist thought: Plato's essences vs. reality, science's objective knowledge vs. opinion; Kant's noumenon vs. phenomenon; Marxism's base vs. ideological superstructure; Freud's id vs. ego; and even the existentialists authentic vs. inauthentic existence. Postmodernists generally argue that "the surface," "mere appearances" is all there is, or at the very least the only thing that counts. Meanings are then generated on the surface level of language that come to create an illusion of depth, when there really is none.

In architecture, postmodernism has also involved a return to "the surface," but in this case by embracing ornamentation which the modernist school had generally rejected as garish, distracting, unnecessary, and ultimately unenlightened. This does not mean, though, that postmodern architecture simply embraces older system of ornamentation (baroque, nineteenth-century historicism, etc); instead, ornamentation has been combined with the techniques of pastiche (discussed bellows) to draw together different system of ornamentation, frequently in conjuncture with elements of modernism (or at least elements that remind one of modernism) to create fun, playful, and ideally more livable structures.

3. **Play**. Because postmodernism generally rejects the depth models of reality, as well as the metanarratives (discussed below), a lot of the seriousness previously associated with different versions of modernism has also been jettisoned. The result is that postmodernism in many different areas has tended to be drawn to the notion of play: the play of meanings, the play of images, the play of language, the play of structural forms. Postmodernists generally aren't out to promote any wholesale world reconstructions or to

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[2] I should note that I use the term "postmodernist" loosely here to apply to anyone who might be located with the field of philosophical, critical, and artistic activity that has been called "postmodern." Many of these individuals would not have identified themselves as postmodernist, and in fact rejected the term.

demand horrible human sacrifice towards building a better world, and so there is often some room to have fun. The only "big battle" that will make postmodernists very serious is the reoccurring motif of fighting against the systems of domination and oppression caught up with some of the big systems of knowledge that dominate our world ("truth," the metanarratives, "high art," etc.). But even here, it is suggested that play can work against systems of domination, insofar as it can involve taking advantage of ambiguities within the system (a so-called "play on meaning") to then erode the system; it can also mean using elements of the system outside of their intended uses (what Claude Levi-Strauss called *bricolage*, and which was partially modeled on the way kids will take pots and pans and play with them as drums, or take other articles of life and use them within their own imaginative play worlds).

3. **Language is not something that reveals, but constructs.** We have a nasty habit of seeing language as a kind of lens through which we see the internal thoughts of others; through stories told by people, he have some notion that we can actually reach out to past times to see how they "really" were. All this is an illusion, however. In postmodernist terms, language is not transparent; we cannot see through it. Instead, language works a little bit perhaps like a view-finder (you know, the kids' toy). It constructs the illusion of being a view into another world, but in fact there is nothing beyond the language. Language works at a very basic level to construct meaning for us; and, in turn, we use language to construct the reality around us.

Many different fields have been influenced at one level or another by "the linguistic turn" of the early 1980s. This refers to the new attention paid in many fields (usually of the social sciences widely understood—history, sociology, anthropology, political science, theology) to how meaning is constructed within language (or within other symbolic systems, for example rituals, images, architectural styles, etc.), and therefore how language and other symbolic systems shape our perceptions, values, thoughts, and even our very lived experiences. In many fields of the social sciences, this was a radical turn away from a series of different methods, often labeled as "modernist" in retrospect, which tried to ascertain "the reality" behind the human perceptions that were considered more fundamental than simply what humans thought about that reality; indeed, many social scientists believed that the reality at some level determined human perceptions in a very linear, cause-effect kind of way, but often in a way that human were quiet unaware of. The linguistic turn, then, was an attempt to take what people have to say seriously—to let people speak to us, even if we recognize that that this communication is always going to be problematic, always going to be a matter of some interpretation.

4. **Narratives and Metanarratives**. With the new attention to language came a focus on narratives—that is, the stories that people tell to try to make sense of the world. We have come to appreciate that stories play a multitude of roles within human life: they allow us to string together meaning, make connections, draw distinctions, construct a sense of who we are, differentiate us from others, shape and maintain memories, draw maps of differential social status and power, provide ultimate meaning to the world, and many, many more. Indeed, one philosopher, Daniel Dennett (who is not a postmodernist, by the

way, but who has engaged himself somewhat with postmodernist ideas) suggests that our minds can be seen as vast, complex, story-writing machines.

Narratives do not have equal value. Most of us unconsciously choose some really enormous stories that we accept both as "true," insofar as we then make a multitude of decisions in relation to them, and as foundational, insofar as they provide a kind of background story to all the other stories that we tell about our lives. The metanarratives, as they are generally called, are the "big stories" that allow us to make ultimate sense of the world: Christianity's story of sin and redemption; the Enlightenment's story of the progress of history towards absolute knowledge; Marx's story about the dialectic of history that will eventual yield equality, social harmony, and truth; America's belief in the eventual triumph of freedom and democracy throughout the world.

The problem with metanarratives is that they are so important to us that we tend to try to make others fit into them—whether they like it or not. And so they are often used to justify systems of domination and control. Metanarratives almost always insist on some basic view of "reality" against which truth can be judged; they also have some sense of a proper world order, against which moral action can be judged. Postmodernists points out that both of these aspects of metanarratives are illusory, and furthermore tend to be used for purpose of oppression. And so many postmodernist have tried to debunk these metarratives as just what they are—big stories, fictions, even myths.

5. **The inherent instability of meaning.** If "truth" has no relationship to any stable source (reality or the subject), then meaning is inherently instable, constantly changing depending on the context (as either its relative usefulness wears off or because of the systems of language which provide an interpretive framework for the meaning changes.)

Postmodern art often makes it a point of demonstrating in an obvious way the instability of meaning. This is most frequently done by assaulting or playing with the standard, traditional categories that we use to understand the world. Much postmodern art breaks down traditional ways of practicing art; a classic example is performance art, which itself was originally a radical mixture of dance, visual arts, music, and many other artistic elements in ways that people had a hard time identifying, or understanding in any easy way. Then there are postmodern films that play with genres by combining them in surprising or jarring ways, or perhaps playing with some of the conventions of the genre in a very self-conscious way. Or, it questions the very meaning of what art is. Dada is sometimes considered an early version, or perhaps a kind of forerunner, of postmodern art by breaking down the divisions between art and non-art. Some of John Cage's music has postmodern elements insofar as here too there is an attempt to question our assumptions about what art can be.[3]

6. **The Death of the Author/Artist**. One victim of the death of "depth models" is the creator/genius/author/artist figure that comes down to us from the Renaissance and was given a new spin during the Romantic period. According to this older view, the art is the

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[3] John Cage also introduced elements of chance into some of his later pieces as a way of taking the artist out of the artistic process. This, in a way, can be seen as expression of the "death of the artist."

expression of a deep soul, whose anguish, or passion, or love, or at the very least power of creativity, is simply communicated and given evidence to by the work of art. This interpretation tends to prioritize the intentions of the artist over all. Postmodernists, though, would suggest that, first, the ultimate meaning intended by the author can never really by known, since that presupposes the existence of a kind of "internal truth of the artist" which simply does not exist. Second, though, the author's intentions wouldn't matter, even if they could be discovered. Once the work of art is created, it becomes a product for all of us to interpret in our own way. The artist's interpretation of his/her own work should not necessarily take priority over anyone else interpretations. All interpretations are by nature equally valid, at some level, since there is no "ultimate truth" to compare interpretation by.

Some postmodernist artists have taken this insight into how the audience constructs its own meaning of the work of art to expose the meaning-making process and to generally self-consciously allow for a multitude of interpretations, instead of trying to cut of alternative readings, as many realist novels of the nineteenth-century as well as other forms of art have done. This is often achieved by introducing non-linear elements to the film and then letting the audience make its own story out of the various elements (for example, in the film *Pulp Fiction*).[4] Other postmodern works will include seemingly random elements in the film (for example, in many David Lynch's films) that allow for a open range of interpretations, without necessarily prejudicing the audience in favor of one interpretation or another.

7. **Intertextuality**. If "truth" is not stable, then we need to pay close attention to the way that specific meanings are generated, and in particular the ways that any given reader does make meaning out of a specific text (which could be a film, a piece of art, a novel, etc.). Since context is key to interpreting any given work, specific textual readers will go out first to the various systems of meanings available to them through their memory and experience. Frequently, this will include other texts (stories that they have heard, films that they have seen at some point, books that they have read) that will help them to make meanings out of the text in front of them. In other words, they will draw associations between the new object and past objects they have encountered that will in effect set up networks of relationships and meanings between the texts. This is what is known as the "intertext," a kind of virtual text created by the reader at any moment of interpretation that allows for a connection between a new text and old ones.

The notion of intertextuality has been very important for Literature studies, where the modernists of the 1950s (known as the New Criticism) argued that the meaning of a work could be found solely within the work itself. The author had a single intention when he wrote the work, and ultimately that meaning was locked up, perhaps even as a kind of

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[4] This is not quite the same as "stream-of-consciousness"—a modernist technique developed by James Joyce and others that at best opened up the possibility of the non-linearity of postmodernist art. The idea of stream-of-consciousness was that it was the "true" expression of a certain phenomenological reality, that is the inner experience of the main character. This presupposes a subject, an internalized ego, which we have seen is also radically questioned by the postmodernist. Postmodernist works of art, in contrast, will suggest not simply the non-linearity of subjective experience, but of "objective experience" and "real life" itself.

"secret code" waiting to be discovered, within the text itself. What was needed then was a "close reading" of the text, a tight analysis of language, symbolism, organization to pick up hidden subtleties that could be found, again, solely within the text itself. And in the end, there would be one meaning, and one meaning only that could be found within the text.

In contrast, the work of deconstruction has shown that the meaning of text can never be contained within the text itself; it always escapes the borders of the story, while at the same time working against itself until the artificiality and arbitrariness of the constructed meaning finally becomes painfully obvious. And then other kinds of literary critics have shown how the meanings of the work are ultimately constructed by the readers themselves, who always bring their own set of assumptions, preconceptions, background, values, and interpretive framework. This serves to create multiple interpretations of the text, none of which are necessarily superior to any other.

8. **The effacement of the boundary between high culture and low (or mass) culture.** If there is no ultimate source of truth, the distinction between high culture and low culture tends to disappear. There have been many ways that the West has tended to validate high culture while denigrating popular or mass culture: high culture is the authentic expression of a deep soul, while low culture is mere entertainment; high culture requires some real thought, while low culture is for mere pleasure; high culture is "serious," while low culture is light fluff. All of this tends to break down within a postmodernist framework.

Many postmodernists have attempted to suggest that underlying power implications of making the distinctions between high and low culture. Most commonly, the division between high culture and low culture has been seen as serving powerful social purposes: as a kind of justification for bourgeois style and a validation of the knowledge held by certain educated elites. The sociologists Bourdieu has suggested that high culture requires a certain degree "cultural capital" (which means a kind of education and upbringing) in order to be able to appreciate it. Our society, then, has designed ways of turning "cultural capital" into "economic capital," and vice versa. So, in short, the distinction between high and low culture tends to perpetuate the class distinction.

Many postmodern artists, in turn, try to validate popular artistic forms (cartoons, pulp fiction, dance music, pop icon figures—think Andy Warhol), or at the very least to blur the boundaries between high and low culture (as with the many high-brow references within any given *Simpsons* episode).

9. **Pastiche**. From a postmodernist perspective, specific artistic styles (High Renaissance, Baroque, neo-Classical, etc.) tend to look rather arbitrary. Their coherence has generally been explained as a kind of "authentic" expression of their era—a creation of a specific Zeitgeist (in a Hegelian sense) or perhaps an expression of the soul of a nation (in the sense of the German nationalist Herder). But once we come to doubt the very notion of authenticity, a specific style comes to be seen as a kind of arbitrary system of specific shapes, forms, symbols, and other artistic elements that look "natural" or "right" to us simply because we have grown up with them and learned to appreciate their

internal networks of meaning. But there is no "natural" reason that this system of meanings has to be maintained. Indeed, whole new systems of meaning can be created by taking different elements from different styles in putting them together in productive ways. This could be freeing, and indeed more original than forcing yourself to live by specific artistic conventions

10. **The exposure of "the Canon."** The Canon refers to that set of works that every academic field (and indeed, culture at large) has which are set apart as special, unique, "classic," and therefore necessary knowledge for anyone who wants to carry out work in the academic field (or perhaps simply wants to be known as a cultured person). The obvious example in English is Shakespeare, which is required background knowledge for those who want to study English literature, but in general is thought to be required background for anyone who wants to call themselves educated.

Many critics in the postmodern era have set about trying to expose the Canon as an arbitrary list of books, the works in which have been selected to promote powerful social, racial, or gender interests. There are many ways to do this: you could show systematically how works by women, or African-Americans have been excluded. You could examine the works themselves to show how the meanings within the work create powerful prejudices against these different social groups. You could provide alternate readings to the "classic" works which subvert the dominant readings of the text. And then, an interesting way has been chosen by Shakespeare scholars who have demonstrated the way that Shakespeare's works themselves are a kind of pastiche taken from different high-culture and low-culture sources.

11. **Art that exposes the artifice of art.** Traditionally, much art in the Western world was supposed to a kind of illusion, yet one that we came to believe in. The more flawless the illusion, the better the work of art. Novels opened up an imaginary world, filled with almost real people, who had seemingly real feelings, and then brought us through experiences that were both extraordinary, and yet still somehow convincing. Statues were supposed to mimic the human or animal form, or at the very least reveal something essential about human nature or the human experience of living. More recently, most contemporary rock 'n' roll albums create an illusion of the real band playing in front of your eyes (and ears), while concealing the process that goes into creating that illusion (the multitrack nature of recording, where every player records separately and often many times before the final composition can be created out of elements of the best recordings).

Much modern art directly rejected the referential nature of art by fragmenting it into pieces (Cubism) or by turning toward abstract expressions. Postmodern art, on the other hand, does not simply reject the referential nature of art; it does its best to actually expose how the illusion-making process works. It retains obvious contradictions, or it might open up gaps within the illusory world so that the illusion might be revealed as hollow. Films, plays, and novels might be self-referential; in other words, they might make off-handed or ironic comments that pulls the audience out of the illusion and forces the audience to confront the work as a kind of construction (a technique used often in the

Simpsons, but also in any film where the actor/ess looks out at or even talks to the audience as if he/she knows that there is an audience out there watching).

12. **The inevitability and productivity of tension, confusion, contradiction, and ambiguity**. Postmodernism has come to see tension, confusion, contradiction, and ambiguity as an inevitable product of the multiple levels of systems of knowledge and narratives circulating at one time. And where little ambiguity or confusion exists, the postmodernist is generally very suspicious, since we have to suspect that there are powerful forces at working creating coherence that is making everything and everyone conform. And so, whereas a modernist often would have seen confusion as a sign of faulty knowledge or the lack of knowledge, contradiction as a problem yet to be worked out, and finally ambiguity as simply a lack of clarity or perhaps a unfortunate misunderstanding, postmodernists generally look for these elements as the inevitable product of living within systems of meaning. Indeed, these aspects can be extremely creative, since they can cause new systems of meaning to be generated, and can sometimes allow us to free ourselves (at least in a small way) from the webs of discourse and meaning that circumscribe our particular circumstance by giving us a range of meanings to choose from.

13. **Liberation**. Although postmodernism is sometimes accused by outsiders of promoting authoritarian or totalitarian tendencies, actually most postmodernists believe they are working towards a kind of liberation—liberation from the totalitarian tendencies of reason that have been discussed by the German sociologists Max Weber and Max Horkheimer (not themselves postmodernists, but very influential on the postmodernists); liberation from the government and social power structures that try to create coherence within the world; and last, liberation from the historical tendencies that tend to shut down change and therefore exclude future developments. Now, admittedly, the notion of liberation is always problematic from a postmodernist perspective. Liberation is one that can only be defined from within the system, and so in some sense is already limited by the system; furthermore, "liberation" from the system has a tendency to generate meanings and systems of practice that in the long run becomes the rules that bind future generations. Still, most postmodernists are not simple determinists, suggesting that we can *only* act in a predictable way according to the system of meaning in which we live. Although we tend to, ambiguities and contradictions within the systems open up a certain space for individual action; the result is the possibility for spontaneity, unpredictability, and in the end something which maybe could be identified as "freedom," so long as we understand the limitations of this term.

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