

Week 22

Postmodernism



Key Questions

- What are the key concepts and issues of postmodernism?
- How do these concepts apply to literature?
- How does postmodernism see literature?
- What is postmodernist fiction?

Key Texts

- Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society" (1988)
- Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra & Simulations" (1981)
- Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism (1988)
- Barry Lewis, "Postmodernism & Literature" (1998)

Defining Postmodernism

- Postmodernism emerges in 1960s and 70s, alongside many of the theories we've considered so far (incl. feminism, new historicism, postcolonialism)
- Wider set of phenomena in art, film, architecture, literature, and popular culture
- Defined by reaction against or further development of modernism:
 1. Postmodernisms “emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations.”

Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 13
- Significance of prefix post is that it indicates a break from as well as inherent reliance on whatever the follows it
- Key characteristics of postmodernism:
 - ◉ Blurring of high culture and popular culture (or mass culture)
 - ◉ Challenge of “grand narratives” (religion, science, etc.)
 - ◉ Challenge of what constitutes reality
 - ◉ Problematizing of time and history
 - ◉ Death of the individual subject
- Postmodernism and its preoccupations are a result of, or a reaction to, late capitalism and the consumer society of the later twentieth century
- Tied to style and aesthetics as well as to a period in history

High Culture & Popular Culture

- Modernism renowned for distinction between elitist art and literature and low-brow or popular art and literature, e.g.:

Fine Art
Opera
Ballet
Art Cinema
Classic Literature
Sculpture



Cartoons
Pop Music
Musical
Television
Trashy novels
Music Videos

- Postmodernism rebels against distinctions by mixing characteristics and references from both categories:
 2. “They no longer ‘quote’ such ‘texts’ as a Joyce might have done [...]; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw.”

Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 13
- In fiction, this often leads to intertextual references to both high and low culture as well as to a mixing of genres (resulting in hybrid genres)

Grand Narratives

- “Grand narratives” (or “master narratives”) coined by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979)
- All knowledge is narrative; knowledge derived from story-telling (myths and legends in tribal times); narratives legitimise knowledge and justify existing power relations
- Religion as narrative: institutionalised narrative knowledge; only one version possible
- In modern era, natural science emerged as new narrative
- Religion and science were (and to some extent still are) universally accepted grand narratives - trying to make sense of history and creating universally accepted narratives
- According to Lyotard, in the postmodern period grand narratives are challenged
- “Grand narratives” cast as old-fashioned and oppressive, allowing only for one version of events, and privileging certain narratives over others, and reinforce existing hierarchies of power

Reality Check

- If all knowledge is narrative, then what does this mean for our perception of reality?
- What is reality? Is it the way science describes the world? Or is it how we perceive the world?
 3. “We experience the world as flat, even though we know it is round. Likewise, we experience the world as solid matter when we know from physics that it is mostly empty space. In other words, our perception of reality is a fiction we adopt.”
Jan Rosemergy, ‘Navigating the Interior Journey: The Fiction of Jeanette Winterson’, *British Women Writing Fiction*, ed. by Abby P. Werlock (University of Alabama Press, 2000), pp.248-269 (p.264)
- Jean Baudrillard uses another example to explain “simulation”: simulating illness and experiencing real symptoms as result:
 4. “Simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’, between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’. The simulator produces ‘real’ symptoms, is he or she ill or not? The simulator cannot be treated either as ill or not ill.”
Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra & Simulations”, p.168
- Simulation has become the real; there is no original or real as referent anymore:
 5. “It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”
Baudrillard, “Simulacra & Simulations”, p.166
 6. “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” Ecclesiastes
Baudrillard, “Simulacra & Simulations”, p.166
- Simulation is not representation because representation assumes that there is a distinction between the real and the copy and assumes that they’re equivalent
- Cf. *A Trip to Italy*: Coogan and Brydon play “themselves”, but what does this mean? They also tackle issues such as their professional perceptions, the blurring of lines between Coogan and Alan Partridge, and discuss the nature and quality of their mimicry

Time & History

- Time and history are also narratives (cf. new historicism)
 - Time is only “real” in the sense that the sun rises and sets; seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years are human inventions; they’re narratives that structure our reality and our understanding and experience of time
 - Cf. does language create reality or does reality create language?
7. “Most bizarre of all, they have no tenses for past, present and future. They do not sense time in that way. For them, time is one. The old man said it was impossible to learn their language without learning their world. I asked him how long it had taken him and he said that question had no meaning.”
Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), pp.134-135
- In postmodern fiction, time is often fragmented (i.e. anti-chronological, flashbacks, etc.)
 - History as a narrativising of events; story that structures experiences in a neat timeline
 - Postmodernism sees history and fiction as equal; history = fiction; fiction = history
 - Postmodern novel tends to return to past and adopts past forms, mixed with present
 - Jameson argues this is a sign we have become unable to deal with history, and have become unable to express our present experience:
8. “As though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself - or, at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.”
Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 20
- Linda Hutcheon theorises this phenomenon differently, as historiographic metafiction
9. “Historiography: The study of the writing of history, the way style, narrative, metaphors, and so on affect how the historical record is received and understood.”
A Dictionary of Critical Theory
10. “Metafiction: Fiction about fiction; or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status.”
The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms
11. “Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems”
Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), p.93

- Postmodern fiction often plays with “real” historic events, changes them, interweaves personal narratives into them, to challenge what we record and understand as history

Death of the Subject

- Idea of the individual key to modernism and notions of writing, genius, and style:
 12. “The great modernisms were, as we have said, predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conceptions of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world to forget its own unique, unmistakable style.”

Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 17
 - Postmodernism suggests that individualism and the individual subject are also illusions, narratives created to give us the impression that we are individual beings with individual powers and choices
 - Idea of individual also key to writing as an individual, and writing something original
 - Postmodernism argues that there is no originality anymore - everything has been written, said, painted in one form or another, and all we do is piece together versions and mixtures of what already exists
 - Jameson explains postmodernism through pastiche and parody:
 13. “Both pastiche and parody involve the imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles.”

Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 15
 14. “Now parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original. In any case, a good or great parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original, just as a great mimic has to have the capacity to put himself/herself in the place of the person imitated. Still, the general effect of parody is - whether in sympathy or with malice - to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write. So there remains somewhere behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which the style of the great modernists can be mocked.”

Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 16
 15. “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal

compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor.”

Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 16

The Problems of Postmodernism

- Postmodernism vs feminism: if the subject is dead, if there is no essence to identity, no stable category of being, then how can feminism defend its existence, given that it operates on the assumption of sexual difference?

16. “Feminism and its political claims are made on behalf of a social group, women, who are seen to have an underlying community of interest, and of an embodied female subject whose identity and experiences [...] are necessarily different from those of men’.

Sue Thornham, ‘Postmodernism and Feminism’ (2005), p.27

- Craig Owens argues that relative absence of female and feminist voices in postmodernism suggests the postmodern project ‘may be another masculine invention to exclude women’
- Postmodernism may, potentially, have become what it so fervently sets out to deconstruct and challenge: a grand narrative

17. “[It is] highly suspicious [...] that the emphasis has been placed on decentering the subject just at the time when *women’s* history has made significant gains by centering on women as the subject of its study.”

Barry, ‘The New Historical Syntheses’, p.93.

- Postmodernism may, potentially, have become what it so fervently sets out to deconstruct and challenge: a grand narrative
- Does it challenge or simply replicate the society and conditions of which it is a product?

18. “We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces - reinforces - the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open.”

Jameson, “Postmodernism & Consumer Society”, p. 28