20th Century American Literature

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Lecture Notes. **Introduction to Post-modernism**

1. What is Postmodernism?
   1. Postmodernism is INDEFINEABLE in a specific way. It is a general and wide-ranging term that is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural and literary criticism, among others. Its basic rule is that *there are no rules*.
   2. Postmodernism is REACTIONARY. It is a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality (this is the method of Modernism). In Postmodernist thinking, reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is *constructed* as the mind tries to understand its own unique and personal reality.
   3. Postmodernism is SKEPTICAL of explanations that claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person.
   4. Postmodernism focuses on INTERPRETATION. Our perception of experience is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually.
   5. Postmodernism focuses on SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE. It relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be biased and relative, rather than certain and universal.
   6. Postmodernism is "POST" because it is *denies the existence of any ultimate principles* (meta-narratives), and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody.
   7. Postmodernism is PARADOXICAL. By placing *all principles* under the scrutiny of its skepticism, it must realize that even *its own principles* are not beyond questioning. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas states, Postmodernism "cannot on its own principles ultimately justify itself any more than can the various [metaphysical](http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/metaph-body.html) overviews against which the postmodern mind has defined itself." (this section adapted from the PBS Series “Faith and Reason.”)
   8. Postmodernism is DISORDERLY. Where Modernism laments the loss of order in the world following the upheaval of the First World War, Postmodernism seeks to recognize and embrace that chaos.
2. How is Postmodernism different from Modernism? They have a lot in common. The differences are largely a matter of “attitude,” or the way that we, as “postmodern humans,” have come to think about the world.
   1. Intellectual Elitism. How do they view the act of creation?
      1. Modernism: There is no truth, but the artist, using texts, can show the way to discovery. (Poetry and painting, especially, take on an almost religious tone.)
      2. Postmodernism: The writer and even language are dirtied and distorted by the unique perspectives of the writer. Nothing is pure. Everything is relative. The best that a writer can do is to try to express their own experiences clearly.
   2. Heterogeneity. How do they view human experience?
      1. Modernism: Seeks to find unity in shared experience. We are all pieces of one thing. (Ex. Faulkner creating a “world” in his body of work in Yoknapatawpha County)
      2. Postmodernism: Acknowledges the fragmentation of experience. The world is made up of individual intellects which are all completely different and don’t know anything about each other or even about themselves.
   3. Imperialism. How do they view perspectives other than their own?
      1. Modernism: To a large extent they view the world through the lens of “Western” consciousness.” Other voices or perspectives are either not considered at all or thought of as less intellectually valid.
      2. Postmodernism: Seeks out the voices from communities that have traditionally been considered capable of producing only “low” art forms.
   4. Sources. Where do they get the material or ideas for their art?
      1. Modernism: The Past: the artist expects the reader to have an understanding of Classical and Canonical texts in order to fully comprehend their work.
      2. Postmodernism: The present: anything can be a text for reference…Any music, movies, commercial art, political speech, anything. Many genres of art are born outside of the traditional, educated, sophisticated forms. “Low” art becomes “high” art. Art is life: unscripted, accidental, spontaneous. Street art, performance art, situational art, and graffiti art are examples.
   5. Reaction. How does the artist expect the viewer to react to the art?
      1. Modernism: The artist expects the reader to react with concentration of the mind: a contemplative, thoughtful feeling.
      2. Postmodernism: Shock and awe. The artist often attempts to surprise the reader, to force them to think in different ways than they have before. Art becomes a tool to break down old traditions and oppressive political institutions, as well as to free the viewer from their “closed mindedness.”
3. Some examples of Postmodernism.
   1. Visual Art.
      1. Salvador Dali. “The Persistence of Memory.” (1931) ([LINK](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_qsSkaXuuUE8/TT6hVjc-L9I/AAAAAAAAAD4/1JnIshd9pCw/s1600/the_persistence_of_memory_-_1931_salvador_dali.jpg))
      2. Pablo Picasso. “Guernica.” (1937) ([LINK](http://www.caribousmom.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/guernicamural.jpg))
      3. Jackson Pollack. “Convergence.” (1952) ([LINK](http://0.tqn.com/d/arthistory/1/0/9/h/jm-aa_08_08.jpg))
      4. Mark Rothko. “White and Greens in Blue.” (1957) ([LINK](http://farm4.staticflickr.com/3115/3143932641_ba6c2f71b0_o.jpg))
      5. Roy Lichtenstein. “Kiss V.” (1965) ([LINK](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-wVQ56ZUypnc/UDARUwb4wsI/AAAAAAAAAT4/7jj265NfZj4/s1600/kiss.jpg))
      6. Andy Warhol. “Marilyn Diptych.” (1962) ([LINK](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/T/T03/T03093_10.jpg))
      7. Robert Smithson. “Spiral Jetty.” (1970) ([LINK](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_rUyDhdZLna8/S_6szbZsDjI/AAAAAAAAXQM/7ehnrsizYic/s1600/Spiral+Jetty_1200.jpg))
      8. Banksy. Untitled Works. ([LINK](http://www.banksy.co.uk/))
   2. Music.
      1. George and Ira Gershwin “Summertime” from *Porgy and Bess*. (opera, 1935) (incorporates jazz and African-American music, considered “low” art forms, into classical compositions.) ([LINK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIDOEsQL7lA))
      2. John Cage. “Music of Changes.” (creates “accidental” compositions where the musical notes are generated at random using the Chinese fortune-telling book *I Ching*. ([LINK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOwcpjr9wFA))
      3. Modern Jazz. Miles Davis. “Kind of Blue.” ([LINK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEPFH-gz3wE))
      4. Rock, punk, etc.
   3. Architecture.
      1. Phillip Johnson. “Glass House.” (1949) ([LINK](http://www.architizer.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/philip.jpg))
      2. Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. “Centre National d’Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris.” (1978) ([LINK](http://pictur.net/gallery/albums/ParisByNight_Edifices/Centre_National_d_Art_et_de_Culture_Georges_Ponpidou_2.sized.jpg))
      3. Frank Gehry. “Guggenheim Museum. Bilbao, Spain.” (1997) ([LINK](http://www.sentireascoltare.com/sa/uploaded_img/artists/Guggenheim-Museum-Bilbao-Spain.jpg))
   4. Performance Art.
      1. Chris Burden. “Trans-fixed.” (1974) ([LINK](http://media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lwvhfu0Oqh1qggdq1.jpg))
      2. Carolee Schneemann. “An Internal Scroll.” (1975) ([LINK](http://carolinanitsch.com/files/gimgs/40_schneeman-interior-scroll-all-1.jpg))
      3. Kyrahm and Julius Kaiser. Human Installation I “Gender Obsolescence.” (2009) ([LINK](http://vimeo.com/15224492))
   5. Installation Art.
      1. Nam Jun Paik. “Electronic Opera #1.” (1973) ([LINK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIBEaszndLA))
      2. Kirill Malovichko. “V2 – Visual Vibrations.” ([LINK](http://vimeo.com/10182716))
4. Some techniques of postmodern art.
   * 1. Pastiche or parody: a work of art, literature, film, music or architecture that openly imitates the work of a previous artist, sometimes with the intent of satire. Ex. Yasumasa Morimura. “Portrait (Futago).” (1988) ([LINK](http://media.photobucket.com/image/recent/szornyella/97788_01_d02.jpg)) VS. Edouard Manet. “Olympia.” (1863) ([LINK](http://uploads5.wikipaintings.org/images/edouard-manet/olympia-1863.jpg))
     2. Bricolage: the construction or creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available, or a work created by such a process. Richard Hamilton. “Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?” (1956) ([LINK](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-rb85Xln25Uk/Tm-GCTEDU4I/AAAAAAAAAh8/dLrj7srJ5eQ/s1600/hamilton_pic_1996547b.jpg))
     3. Irony: “Postmodern irony is allusive, multilayered, preemptive, cynical, and above all, nihilistic. It assumes that everything is subjective and nothing means what it says. It's a sneering, world-weary, *bad* irony, a mentality that condemns before it can be condemned, preferring cleverness to sincerity and quotation to originality. Postmodern irony rejects tradition, but offers nothing in its place.” Jon Winokur in *The Big Book of Irony.*
     4. Playfulness: Taking serious, disturbing, or political messages and using humor or childish methods to show them in a different way. Often meant to ridicule traditional or established cultural meanings.