
INTRODUCTION: READING *A POSTMODERN READER*

Is a cultural enterprise over, *kaput*, finished when it sits still long enough for you to define it? If it is, then the one we have been calling the “postmodern” is still alive and well and thwarting us daily. This *Reader* attempts to present—however provisionally and temporarily—at least part of its ongoing, lively shape-shifting.

With strong resistance from many quarters, the term “post-modern” has slowly come to be accepted as a general post-1960s period label attached to cultural forms that display certain characteristics such as reflexivity, irony, parody, and often a mixing of the conventions of popular and “high art.” As such it has been attached to everything from Madonna’s videos to films like *Blue Velvet*, from rap music to a “grand opera” like “The Ghosts of Versailles,” from Douglas Adams’s *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency* to Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*, from the “appropriation” art of Barbara Kruger and Hans Haacke to the parodic paintings of Attila Richard Lukacs and Mark Tansey. In short, it has been used to talk about architecture, literature, dance, film, video, theater, television, music, and the visual arts, but also political thought, philosophy, aesthetic criticism and theory, anthropology, geography, historiography, theology, pedagogy, etc.

As any computer search will show, the constantly growing number of books, articles, and special issues of journals addressing postmodern concerns is daunting: a simple bibliographical listing alone might fill this entire volume. Clearly, in Dick Hebdige’s words, “the degree of semantic complexity and overload surrounding the

term 'postmodernism' at the moment signals that a significant number of people with conflicting interests and opinions feel that there is something sufficiently important at stake here to be worth struggling and arguing over" (1991, 182).

This *Reader* aims to sample some of the skirmishes underway in those struggles and arguments, and to give some sense of what is at stake in them. Its premise is that the postmodern is no more ignorable than is the air we breathe; in a sense, it *is* the social and cultural air we breathe, for it has been linked (as we shall see in the pages to follow) to such vast notions as "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson), the general condition of knowledge in an age of informational technology (Lyotard), and even a wholesale substitution of the "simulacrum" for the "real" (Baudrillard).

The actual term "postmodern" has been around now for many years, although its meaning has fluctuated dramatically (see, for example, Howe 1959; Hoffmann, Hornung, and Kunow 1977; Kohler 1977; Paterson 1986; Fokkema and Bertens 1986)—but the one thing it usually connotes is change. Stephen Toulmin wrote of a previous, analogous change in these terms: "Evidently, *something* important happened early in the seventeenth century, a result of which—for good or ill, and probably for both—society and culture in Western Europe and North America developed in a different direction from that which they would otherwise have followed" (1990, 12).

This shift from "Scholasticism" to "Modernity" has its echo, many would say, in our present shift from "Modernity" to "Postmodernity." Evidently *something* important is also happening in this last part of the twentieth century, as a result of which—again, probably for both good and ill—society and culture in the same places, Western Europe and North America, are moving along different paths, into different mindsets from those offered us by the Enlightenment and even by later models of modernity.

Unlike other related anthologies, this *Reader* samples and presents some of these general conceptual moves that have made possible the many forms of postmodernism we see around us in the arts and in other discourses. Whatever it is that is happening in this broader thing called postmodernity, it has opened the way for such new counterdisciplinary domains as "cultural studies"—with its deliberate lack of a distinct methodology and its mandate to investigate such broad areas as "the history of cultural studies, gender and sexuality, nationhood and national identity, colonialism and post-colonialism, race and ethnicity, popular culture and its audiences, science and ecology, identity politics, pedagogy, the politics of

aesthetics, cultural institutions, the politics of disciplinarity, discourse and textuality, history, and global culture in a postmodern age" (Nelson, Treichler, Grossberg 1992, 1).

To offer only one other of many possible examples, the rise of "Post-Marxism," as seen in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, has also been made possible by a different conceptual "take" on the social and economic order and the role of class analysis in it. Whether we call this shift to postmodernity a change of paradigm or plane or *episteme*, whether we see the postmodern as a moment, a movement, a project, a condition or a period, *something* important is happening. You will see all these different terms used in the various essays that follow, and the accompanying introductory section prefaces have attempted to give voice to the complex overlappings as well as distinctions among them.

As the first readings here suggest, these terms are used to describe a major (and usually a disturbing) shift away from modernity's universalizing and totalizing drive—a drive that was first fueled, in the seventeenth century, by Descartes' foundational ambitions and his faith in reason. Postmodernity's assertion of the value of inclusive "both/and" thinking deliberately contests the exclusive "either/or" binary oppositions of modernity. Postmodern paradox, ambiguity, irony, indeterminacy, and contingency are seen to replace modern closure, unity, order, the absolute, and the rational. These may be very bold and bald categories, but they are ones that essay after essay in this book rearticulates in its own way.

The postmodern valuing of the local and the particular, the provisional and the tentative, is said to contest modernity's privileging of the general and the universal in matters of "Truth, Beauty, Goodness." What disappears with this shift is the comforting security—ethical, ontological, epistemological—that "reason" offered within the modern paradigm: hierarchy and system are put into question, as intellectual grounds and foundations crumble under our feet. Nevertheless, postmodernity's critiques of universalizing modern theories have turned out to be as liberating and empowering as they have been confounding and disturbing (see Harvey 1989)—as shown by the complex responses to typical postmodern positionings, such as those offered by post-structuralism and deconstruction, in various areas of study in the last few years.

As a broad conceptual category, then, postmodernity has been seen to flourish in the predominantly white metropolitan cultures of the Europeanized West; it is critical of, and yet also—inevitably if uncomfortably—implicated within the modern paradigm it contests. That paradigm is actually capacious and heterogeneous

enough to include capitalism, patriarchy, and that paradoxical liberal humanism which asserts both the individual subject and something general called “human nature”—often figured as a set of universal and eternal, human and humane values.

Despite its inclusivity (or what some see as its complicity), the critical edge of postmodernity’s deconstructing of the modern universalizing tendency comes from its awareness of the value and significance of respecting difference and otherness. This awareness is brought about as much by sustained oppositional social activism of women, gays and lesbians, people of color, and formerly colonized nations as by the more abstract theorizing about power and the mobile field of force relations discussed by philosophers, political theorists, and cultural critics. Cornel West (1990) has defined this as the “new cultural politics of difference.”

As we shall see, however, especially in its intersection with identity politics, this postmodern celebration of the different and of cultural “interpermeability” has been accused of running “the risk of effacing real difference” (Chicago Cultural Studies Group 1992, 538). In response to this worry, Henry Giroux argues in an essay in this book that—in the face of the modern neglect of differences of race, ethnicity, and gender in the name of its universalizing formalisms—the postmodern acceptance of a plurality of voices (none of them universal or even grounded in any foundational “truth”), along with its recognition of their partiality, might well lead to a more viable democratic public life.

To move from postmodernity to postmodernism is to shift from this general frame of reference (our primary concern in the *Reader*) into more limited aesthetic and cultural realms. Here, the postmodernist—in various art forms—has been interpreted either as a continuation of the more radical aspects of Euro-American modernism (such as its reflexivity and irony) or else as marking a rupture with such things as the modernist ahistorical bent or its yearning for aesthetic autonomy and closure.

The postmodern interest in issues of subjectivity and representation—who we are and how we “image” ourselves to ourselves—or its concern for ideology and history can be seen in the proliferation of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction,” but those same novels also bear many of the markers of modernist fiction—formal self-consciousness, parody, wordplay, and so on. The fact that there is no agreement on the precise nature of the relation between the modern and the postmodern in many discourses is itself likely an inevitable part of the general condition of postmoder-

nity: an acknowledgment of the impossibility (and, indeed, the undesirability) of reaching any absolute and final "Truth."

If you have followed the reviews in the newspapers or magazines over the last decade, you will know that postmodern art does appear to provoke contradictory (and strong) responses. Both in the media and in scholarly journals, its fiction has been called a literature of replenishment (Barth 1980), on the one hand, and the art of an inflationary economy (Newman 1985), on the other. In short, unlike postmodernity (where there is a general agreement that *something* happened), postmodernism has provoked precious little agreement on anything from the reasons for its existence to its definition, let alone on the evaluation of its effects. As some of the readings in this book suggest, one of the reasons for this disagreement no doubt lies in the paradoxical nature of the beast itself: in its ironic self-undermining critical stance and in its commitment to doubleness—that is, to the juxtaposition and equal weighing of such seeming contraries as the self-reflexive and the historically grounded, the inward-direction of form and the outward-direction of politics.

While some see postmodern art forms as managing to milk the power of traditions and conventions even as they undermine both—at one and the same time purveying and protesting cultural dominants—others see only one half of the doubleness: the complicity or the critique. These radically disparate evaluations and interpretations of postmodernism are in part the result of its own formal paradoxes and particular fence-sitting politics of the "middle ground" (Wilde 1987); the complexity of this strategic doubleness and the resultant political ambidextrousness is what many of the essays sampled in this book seek to explore.

If one of the messages of the postmodern is that cultural values are always local and particular, and not universal and eternal, then we will also have to think about whether—for example—the French figuration of the postmodern should necessarily be the same as the Canadian, or whether the white American need resemble the African-American model. Jean-François Lyotard's defining of the postmodern as marking the death of the grand "metanarratives" that used to make sense of our world for us comes out of a different intellectual and historical frame of reference than does Jürgen Habermas's counterargument that the modernist project of Enlightenment rationality requires completion first. In Germany, it is arguable that modernity was indeed cut short by National Socialism, but Lyotard also develops his definition of the "postmodern

condition” out of a particular “report on knowledge” undertaken specifically for the Québec government.

The postmodern revaluing of the “different” over the “same” demands that such distinctions among ways of thinking about the postmodern be both respected and historicized, not disregarded or downplayed.

It is for this reason that this *Reader* attempts to bring together many (often conflicting) points of view on what the postmodern is and how it operates, and that no attempt has been made to offer any single, systematizing, universalizing (in other words, modern) theory of the postmodern. Of course we are aware of the (postmodern) paradox that frames our very act of anthologizing, even when the aim is not to canonize or fix, but instead to sample (amply) and enact what Lévi-Strauss called “intellectual bricolage” (1966, 17).

With no pretence to completion or “coverage,” this is necessarily a partial, provisional, strategic, contingent, contestable, and temporary postmodern sampler. We have deliberately called this a *Postmodern Reader*, rather than an anthology of theories of postmodernity, in order to call attention to the level of process—yours—as readers reading a reader. A volume like this may inevitably institutionalize—but perhaps it need not always do so—by granting the reader a place to rest, an Archimedean point outside itself from which to judge.

As readers of the postmodern, you read about it within a constantly changing context, one that no collection can ever fix or stabilize. We too are readers, but also teachers of courses on postmodernism (at all levels). Therefore we have included in this book particular readings that we have found to “work” in the classroom. These include both “user-friendly,” accessible texts that have provoked lively discussion, and also those essays that are most frequently cited in the rapidly proliferating literature on the subject.

These samplings (for they can only be that) are organized into four sections. The first series of readings, simply called “Modern/Postmodern,” explores the relation between modernity and postmodernity, and examines exactly what people think is entailed in that *something* important that is busy happening these days. Philosophers, social and political commentators, as well as cultural and literary analysts, present controversial background articles on the complex genealogy of the postmodern as it is traced through such concepts as modernization, modernism, and—especially—modernity. The second section, “Representing The Postmodern,” contains readings that debate the possibility—even the desirability—of trying to define the postmodern, especially given its stated

agenda of decentering, challenging, and subverting the guiding “metanarratives” of Western culture.

Section III is called “Entanglements And Complicities,” and explores the postmodern implication in these very narratives, considering in detail the challenges of feminist, post-colonial, and African-American theory to that complex interrelationship. The fourth and last group of readings moves from theory to “Practices” in order to investigate, in a number of fields, the common denominators of the postmodern condition in action. Given the vast range of postmodern practices and the inevitable restrictions of space in any sampling, the preface to Section IV briefly extends the scope of this discussion into other areas.

As Zygmunt Bauman has put it, “[i]t is not easy to narrate postmodernity” (1992, xxiv). Yet, each of these sections opens with a narrative that introduces the terms of the postmodern debates as enacted within the essays grouped together there. These prefaces are written with Bauman’s warning in mind: “The closer they [narratives of postmodernity] come to picturing the postmodern condition as a balanced system, the graver their faults will risk being” (1992, xxiv). And yet, given our common implication in at least the educational narratives of modernity, this is a risk teachers, readers, and *Readers* must take. So, onto the tightrope stretched between modernity’s rational order and postmodernity’s contingent provisionality step these prefatory acrobats, self-reflexive and multi-voiced. There they are joined by every page of this book, and only their audience knows for sure whether there is a safety net below.

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