**Defining Postmodernism**

**http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0242.html**

In the interest of providing some sense of the range of the debate surrounding postmodernism, a debate which is central to much current thinking on hypertext, here is a definition provided by James Morley. It appears here as it was posted on the [*Postmodern Culture*](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0208.html) electronic conference list.

*What is postmodernism?*

Firstly, postmodernism was a movement in architecture that rejected the modernist, avant garde, passion for the new. Modernism is here understood in art and architecture as the project of rejecting tradition in favour of going "where no man has gone before" or better: to create forms for no other purpose than novelty. Modernism was an exploration of possibilities and a perpetual search for uniqueness and its cognate--individuality. Modernism's valorization of the new was rejected by architectural postmodernism in the 50's and 60's for conservative reasons. They wanted to maintain elements of modern utility while returning to the reassuring classical forms of the past. The result of this was an ironic brick-a-brack or *collage* approach to construction that combines several traditional styles into one structure. As collage, meaning is found in combinations of *already* created patterns.

Following this, the modern romantic image of the lone creative artist was abandoned for the playful technician (perhaps computer hacker) who could retrieve and recombine creations from the past--data alone becomes necessary. This synthetic approach has been taken up, in a politically radical way, by the visual, musical, and literary arts where collage is used to startle viewers into reflection upon the meaning of reproduction. Here, pop-art reflects culture (American). Let me give you the example of Californian culture where the person--though ethnically European, African, Asian, or Hispanic--searches for authentic or "rooted" religious experience by dabbling in a variety of religious traditions. The foundation of authenticity has been overturned as the relativism of collage has set in. We see a pattern in the arts and everyday spiritual life away from universal standards into an atmosphere of multidimentionality and complexity, and most importantly--the dissolving of distinctions. In sum, we could simplistically outline this movement in historical terms:

1. premodernism: Original meaning is possessed by authority (for example, the Church). The individual is dominated by tradition.

2. modernism: The enlightenment-humanist rejection of tradition and authority in favour of reason and natural science. This is founded upon the assumption of the autonomous individual as the sole source of meaning and truth--the Cartesian cogito. Progress and novelty are valorized within a linear conception of history--a history of a "real" world that becomes increasingly real or objectified. One could view this as a Protestant mode of consciousness.

3. postmodernism: A rejection of the sovereign autonomous individual with an emphasis upon anarchic collective, anonymous experience. Collage, diversity, the mystically unrepresentable, Dionysian passion are the foci of attention. Most importantly we see the dissolution of distinctions, the merging of subject and object, self and other. This is a sarcastic playful parody of western modernity and the "John Wayne" individual and a radical, anarchist rejection of all attempts to define, reify or re-present the human subject.

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Postmodernism and the Postmodern Novel - http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0256.html

Few terms have been subject to such intense debates as "postmodernism." Though its indiscriminate use has all but exhausted the word of any kind of precise meaning, one can distinguish three major usages: (i) to refer to the non-realist and non-traditional literature and art of the post-World War Two period; (ii) to refer to literature and art which takes certain modernist characteristics to an extreme stage, a view propounded in John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion"; and (iii) to refer to a more general human condition in the "late-capitalist" world of the post 1950s, a period marked by the end of what Jean-François Lyotard calls the grand "meta-narratives" of western culture. The myths by which we once legitimized knowledge and practice--Christianity, Science, Democracy, Communism, Progress, no longer have the unquestioning support necessary to sustain the projects which were undertaken in their name, resulting in a radical decentring of our cultural sphere. It is not simply that the postmodernism does not believe in "truth" so much that it understands truth and meaning as historically constructed and thus seeks to expose the mechanisms by which this production is hidden and "naturalized."

Among the modernist devices which postmodernism pushes to a new extreme are: the rejection of mimetic representation in favour of a self-referential "playing" with the forms, conventions and icons of "high art" and literature; the rejection of the cult of originality in recognition of the inevitable loss of origin in the age of mass production; the rejection of plot and character as meaningful artistic conventions; and the rejection of meaning itself as delusory.

However, where modernism thought of itself as a last ditch attempt to shore up, like Eliot's Fisher King, the ruins of western culture, postmodernists often gleefully accept its demise and plunder its remains for their artistic materials. Andy Warhol's multiple images of Marilyn Monroe and Kathy Acker's re-writing of Cervantes' Don Quixote are representative of the postmodernist trend toward to bricolage, the use of the bits and pieces of older artifacts to produce a new, if not "original," work of art, a work which blurs the traditional distinctions between the old and the new even as it blurs those between high and low art.

Postmodernism in literature is usually associated with (among others) Acker, Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Bartheleme, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino and John Ashberry. Their literary strategies widely differ, but each shows a self-reflexive interest in the processes of narrative itself and the means by which it constructs both text and reader. In Barth's short story, "Lost in the Funhouse," for example, the narrator constantly breaks the illusion of realism to make reference to the conventional codes of literature which he is currently employing:

En route to Ocean City he sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G\_\_\_\_\_, age fourteen, a pretty girl and exquisite young lady who lived not far from them on B\_\_\_\_ Street [...] Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an illusion that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means. (69)

Though postmodernism is considered something of a spent force in certain circles (most of its major literary figures, Pynchon, Barth, Bartheleme, etc., produced their most vigorous work in the late sixties and seventies), its legacy is perhaps the most dominant context for the formal experimentation which characterizes hypertext fiction. If postmodernism is condemned for having given up the world of social and political engagement for the solipsistic pleasures of word play, what will be said of a fiction that entices its readers into the ethereal void of the electronic word? Does Borges's fable of the library which encompasses the whole world not have its uncanny realization in William Gibson's cyberspace, or Ted Nelson's Xanadu project? Barthelme's episodic short stories and Ballard's "condensed novels" have paved the way for the fiction of nodes and links, but it remains to be seen whether its authors can yet turn the detritus of our collapsing "meta-narratives" into the stuff of a new mode of representation.