

CHAPTER 8

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Postmodernism: Irony, Parody, and Pastiche

The rise of postmodern styles and sensibilities that began in late twentieth-century art, popular culture, architecture, and advertising has intersected in recent decades with new modes of culture and economics, fueled largely by digital technologies and social media.

1. Postmodernity/ Postmodernism

- Today's world consists of a mix of modern and postmodern, and even some pre-modern elements
- "The Postmodern Condition" by Jean Francois Lyotard
- Modernity- industrialization, science, progress, enlightenment
- Postmodernity- historical period after WWII and after 1968
 - David Harvey- describes it as disruptive and disorienting
 - Involves acceleration of production and consumption, outsourcing, new technology, and a shift in economies from goods to services
 - Liberalism, modernization, and progress
 - Questions what we consider "truth" and if society is actually progressing

"In contrast (to modernity), postmodern thought is characterized by the questioning of the supposed universality of structural knowledge, as well as skepticism about modern belief in progress: Is "progress" always toward something better? For whom is any given instance of "progress" better? Can we really know the human subject? How can truth be pure or unmediated? If we acknowledge that all knowable truth is mediated, then is truth's basis in representation or simulation? Embracing postmodern thought entails profoundly questioning the foundations of truth that shore up our knowledge of social structures and our means of producing knowledge about social relations and culture." p 303

- Skepticism about master narratives/metanarratives- frameworks of belief. We question the effectiveness of systems to improve them
- Frederic Jameson- recognized the turn in art to its value and meaning, and that the human experience has many different meanings
- Jameson questioned the certainty, stability, predictability, and knowable truth of modernism.
- Postmodernism
 - embraced the vernacular and style by copying and appropriating and using bricolage to show disgust with the elitism of modernists
 - Architects like Robert Venturi moved away from industrial design, to decorative designs more appealing and relatable to everyday people

2. Simulation and the Politics of Postmodernity

- A key aspect of postmodernism is its turn from representation to simulation
 - Jean Baudrillard - introduced the concept in his 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation* (see Blackboard reading)
 - Counterfeit - Real/Original vs Copy based on media and digital ways of knowing
 - A representation stands in for (or provides) data about something that pre-exists (*a denotation*).
 - A simulation is an action (or process) being imitated but the model used of the real precedes the real itself. (*replaces the thing itself*)
- Ex: Beijing's World Park
 - Contains simulations of other sites that exist elsewhere (Egypt's pyramids, Michelangelo's David, and Manhattan's skyline)
 - The simulacra serves as a basis of knowledge and experience of place or history from afar (*without ever experiencing the original it simulates*)
 - Functioning as a signifier without the need of a "real", signified redefining what is considered a legitimate and valuable experience.
- Hyperreal
 - refers to "a world where codes of reality are used to simulate reality without a reference existing" (*similar to digital image that is not reliant on the indexical relationship to the original – authenticity is questioned*)
 - These concepts are reliant on image culture: "... because they are sites of the production of meaning and representation," but "because they are sites of disappearance of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgement of reality" (pg. 309)
- Postmodernism
 - Style is the key characteristic of the postmodern, making it a useful framework for contemporary political culture
 - The point is not that the real person does not exist but that the real of the person's life is forged through images, brands, and styles. (pg. 309)
 - Entails the ironic acceptance of one's own immersion in mass/low/popular culture
 - Contrasts with modernism's ideologies to mass culture and saturation of images
 - Constitutes its own form of political thinking due to its emphasis on difference, pluralism, and questioning truth (*relativity vs absolutism*)
- Seyla Benhabib - demystification of the male subject of thought
 - *Focuses on the rejecting Enlightenment based concept of man but offers subject as produced through discourse*
 - In postmodernism, humans became widely recognized as a political fiction that shored up power dynamics
 - Concepts of "mankind" and "progress" make up the fragmented cultures that fall outside the Enlightenment

- Illustrates how feminist intervention informed postmodernism
- Rhizome Growth Model
 - ***The destabilization and decentralization of these concepts is the hallmark of postmodern thought***
 - Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari- emphasized its usefulness
 - It is a decentralized plant structure that follow a non-hierarchical pattern of growth
 - Operates by variation, expansions conquest capture, offshoots
 - Remain a vital component for contemporary thought

3. Reflexivity and Distanced Knowing

- *Drowning Girl* by Roy Lichtenstein (1963)
 - Appropriate comic book style in this fine art painting- exemplifies postmodernism's reflexive knowing amidst modernist notions of truth
 - Appropriates low culture style to high class gallery work
 - Empowers female character because she saves herself without help of male in cover
 - Other artists like Barbara Kruger and Dara Birnbaum also use female heroin as anti-hero
 - Birnbaum- *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978)- shows how video can be transformed into an expressive medium *using postmodern methods*
- Postmodernism- looks at pop culture and uses new ways of viewing, acknowledging that consumers have been exposed to pretty much everything already
- Relies of referencing, quoting, and copying to create something new
- Reflexivity- making the work self-aware, calling viewers to be aware of motives
- Bertolt Brecht- German Marxist playwright introduced narrative strategy of distanciation
 - Viewers break identification with characters and become aware of narrative strategies as ideological lure- enables conscious critique
 - **Ex:** breaking the fourth wall in video
 - (**Ex:** *the shadow of the photographer present in the composition of the photo itself*)
- “No Movie” (1970's) by Chicano artists Harry Gamboa Jr., Patssi Valdez, Willies Herron III, and Glugio Nicandro- performed film shoots for imagines movies, and made film stills on nonexistent sets
 - Intended to join audience in ironic criticism of the absence of Mexican-American stars in the Hollywood industry and in Los Angeles media
 - Appropriates the film still form to protest the invisibility of Mexican stars
 - Asco, *Asshole Mural*, 1974- Pose in front of a sewer not the Hollywood sign, it implies that Hollywood produces a lot of crap (*waste*)
 - A postmodern work that uses reflexivity to give a political critique

- (Ex: Cindy Sherman's photographs of fictional film stills p136)

4. Jaded Knowing and Irony

- Postmodernism questions the values of innovation
- When looking at how postmodern style informs popular culture, we see how these forms help make new subjects
- Appropriation as a political strategy
 - Techniques (such as discontinuity, reflexivity, and narrative fragmentation) previously used have now become used by many advertisers and marketers
 - Can become a means of remaking old culture in new directions, but is known to backfire
- Anime
 - Long history in Japan and the US
 - Became an outlet for dystopian postmodern views of the collapse of modernity's industrial landscape (Katsuhiro Otomo's 1988 *Akira*)
 - Afterward, it became a global phenomenon with Studio Ghibli acting as one the most influential sources of anime films
 - Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) is considered a cult classic of the postmodern era
 - A "postmodern" studio-refers to the blurring across high art and popular culture
- Scientific Skepticism
 - After the U.S bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, scientists had lost faith in the pursuit of knowledge that could result in massacres
 - Japanese culture changed dramatically as the country came to grips with the changed world and values
 - Akira Mizuta Lippit- "how the atomic bomb affected visibility after WWII?" (*Atomic Light* 1995)
 - Ex: *Barefoot Gen* (1973-1985) by Keiji Nakazawa
 - Loosely based on his own prior experience as a child survivor of Hiroshima
 - The manga makes possible a kind of visual construction of these events that *live action* film cannot
 - Artists who turned to the manga form found that it allows them to negotiate "shadow optics" - light became representative of devastation and destruction after the bombing becoming understood in a postmodern way
- Influence on U.S Animation
 - *Toy Story* (1995) appealed to both adult and child viewership, beginning a digital animation trend in Hollywood
 - *The Lego Movie* (2014) speaks to its audience as knowing while engaging in ambiguous play with cultural references and Lego itself

- Its irony functions as a sliding signifier across the political spectrum
- Ai Weiwei Controversy
 - A major figure in the Chinese art world and been targeted by the Chinese government
 - He began to use Lego sets to make sculptures due to them being the ideal material for when kept under house arrest
 - Lego sets “are very simple and straightforward, but can also be easily destroyed and taken apart, ready to be remade and reimagined. I like the idea of using this language and material as an expression of human nature and the hand of creation.” (pg. 320)
 - Denied him the right to order Legos in bulk stating that they couldn’t approve of its use in political works
 - Demonstrates the overlaps between consumer culture, art, popular culture, and politics
- Nikki S. Lee
 - Makes use of performative identity in her work such as *Projects* (19997-2001)
 - Combines performance art and ethnography to observe and adopt styles of identity groups
 - Her aim was not to fool people of her authenticity, but to experiment with identities through culture performance
 - Once accepted as part of the group, a photo was taken in her new environment
 - Her work points to postmodern knowing forcing the audience to navigate the illusion and framework that constructs it (*use of textual poaching p78*)

5. Remix and Parody

- It doesn’t matter that there are not really any new ideas in the postmodern era - remixes, remakes, parodies, and mash-ups created for work
- Youtube created in 2005- created global interlink for sharing content, including advertisement
- Makes “experts” obsolete because it enables anyone to be a producer
- Remix video culture- older cultural practices of using previous material
- Remix culture addresses that viewers know the original material
 - *Everything Is Not Awesome- The Lego Movie* parody to protest Shell’s Oil commitment to Arctic drilling. -expects viewers to know the original movie (*intertextuality*), and the political debate over Arctic Drilling
- Parody- remix strategy to create ironic and comedic commentaries that proliferated in postmodern culture
- Classical films and TV genres are similar, they play off conventions which are familiar to viewers, yet change the story a bit. Most works today are parodies

- **Ex: *Scream* (1996)**- Uses parodic elements and reflexive dialogue about genre conventions, yet the movie is still a good horror film
- Intertextuality- the text refers to other *texts/media products/images* to create layers of meaning to interest the viewer by following chains of signifiers. *It creates a kind of subject that is “in the know”*
- *Simpsons* - a TV show that bases its content on parodies with ironic humor

6. Pastiche

- Richard Dyer- the way to understand “pastiche” is imitation that announces itself as such that combines elements from other sources (*quoting*)
- Has a long particular history in image-making
- It steals historical elements that empty the signifiers of historical meaning
- Rarely done with the intention to make a statement, but to remix the older styles from historical eras
- Focuses on “the seemingly limitless recycling of fragments of signifying artifacts that fill and even litter our world in the postmodern era” (pg. 326)
- This concept questions the status of history and the value of a copy or part copy in its easy methods of reproduction
- Jeff Wall- *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* (1993)
 - Remakes the famous 1831-33 print *A High Wind on Yeijiri* by Katsushika Hokusai
 - Wall’s photograph derives its meaning from its status as a photographic remake of a woodcut (*and is a digital composite stitched together from many parts*)
 - Knowing the past through reproduction and repeated styles is the key theme of pastiche
- Christian Boltanski - *Reserves: The Purim Holiday* (1989)
 - Replicates signifiers of the Holocaust to reflect how it still hovers over European-American culture
 - Referencing the effect of the Holocaust while refusing its representational codes
 - Uses pastiche in photographs as historical referent
 - Engages the topic of the individual and how one remembers the past
- Pastiche expresses content through imitation; “it can, at its best, allow us to feel our connection to the affective frameworks, the structures of feeling, past and present, that we inherit and pass on. That is to say it enables us to know ourselves effectively as historical beings” (pg. 329)
- Nao Bustamante- *Kevlar Fighting Costumes* (2015)
 - Part of the *Soldadera* series, a project as a result of five years of research about the role of women in the Mexican Revolution
 - Used archival footage and photographs to reconstruct the dresses worn by *soldaderas* (women soldiers)

- The dresses were oversized to be installed in Vincent Price Art Museum in LA

7. Postmodern Space, Architecture, and Design

- Simulations become a distancing factor in postmodernism, like the railroad did in modernity
 - Proliferation of virtual world through gaming
- Way to move beyond the real: *We are Not a Crime* (2015)- a holographic protest to Spanish law curtailing protest and free speech. Replayed many times online
 - Enhanced meaning since actual bodies in space was restricted, like how holograms do not actually exist
- Marc Auge- “nonplaces”- sites where people are distracting and waiting, engrossed in their phones instead. This is like virtual space *between spaces*
- Postmodern design and architecture leans towards irony and kitch- playfully functional
 - *Swiss Door Wedge* by Andrew Stafford- humorous and functional product
- Pastiche- mixing historical styles, defies the idea that changing styles improves them
- Postmodern architecture- importance on the environment where they are
 - Surpasses functionality- arches, columns, facades, all for decoration
- Post Industrial aesthetic- reworks industrial spaces instead of replacing
 - *High Line* in NYC- previously an elevated railway, now a public park
 - Makes nature part of an urban space
- The extent of repetition in postmodern art brings into question whether the cultural dynamic can change

*One of the primary issues that hovers over postmodernism is the degree to which its approaches respond to modernism's fading and shifting aspects, and the degree to which they signal a new era, a **new episteme**, and a new way of making art, popular culture, fiction, and buildings. If everything is repetition, then how do we change the political dynamics of the world? Postmodernism's self-consciousness might fold in on itself as the viability of appropriation and the remake to take us someplace new fails. Political change and resistance to discrimination, exploitation, and political violence are difficult to theorize through postmodern thought and remain tied to remnants of Enlightenment thought—a body of philosophy that is also the source of much that produces inequality and discrimination. p334*