
Chapter 1

Introducing postmodernism

Postmodernism is a word that has been applied to many different forms of cultural activity from the 1960s onwards. For some time there has been an ongoing debate about postmodernism through which many attempts have been made to give more precise definition to what we might understand by it and the contexts – such as architecture, literature and film, for example – to which it has been applied. The use of the term has also at times shifted from academic disciplines such as philosophy, literary theory and cultural studies into more general usage through its application to particular styles and trends in a variety of different contexts and situations. For example, in *The Guardian* newspaper on Friday 29 July 2011, film critic Peter Bradshaw described the latest Hollywood production *Captain America: The First Avenger* as having a ‘clever postmodern twist’,¹ while in the book review section of the same newspaper the following day a new novel from Hari Kunzru, *Gods Without Men*, is claimed as an example of ‘ironic postmodern sophistication’.² It is not necessary to explain why these examples are described in this way, rather it is sufficient at this stage simply to note the reference to postmodernism in relation to both film and literature within a current journalistic but still critical discourse.

Within this chapter, and at later stages of the book, reference will be made to some definitions and applications of postmodernism as it emerged through wide intellectual contexts. The attempt to create an understanding of the ‘resolutely contradictory’ phenomenon that is postmodernism and the outlining of some starting points that follows will be taken from philosophy and other related disciplines, such as literary theory. This will involve summary of some key thinkers and ideas and go some way towards anticipating their potential relevance to music. However, the primary purpose of this stage of the discussion will be, through continuing to pose the question of what postmodernism is, to put in place some substantial theoretical and contextual points of reference that will be returned to throughout the subsequent stages of this book, in dialogue with a more direct turn towards exploring what postmodernism in music might actually sound like.

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What is postmodernism?

Although this question in itself seems straightforward, providing an adequate answer is far from easy. It can be assumed that postmodernism is a word, a concept, that has been developed in order to define culture after modernism, with the prefix 'post' simply indicating the going beyond of modernism. But how that culture is identified, defined and discussed remains open to interpretation. For some, the direction of the debate, and the answer to the question of what postmodernism is, will be that there is no such thing while, for others, the relevance of the term will be recognized but still left in a rather problematic, unresolved state.³ Of those who take a positive view of postmodernism there may be a suggestion of a certain consensus; there are certainly a number of recurring factors in most discussions of postmodernism – fragmentation, pluralism, difference – but there will still be divergences, variations of subject matter and interpretation.

One recurrent factor in most attempts to provide some kind of answer to the question of 'what is postmodernism?' is the initial complexity and resistance to definition that seems to be inherent within the term. For example, Hans Bertens, writing at the start of a book that claims to be a history of the idea of the postmodern, can state that

Postmodernism is an exasperating term, and so are postmodern, postmodernist, postmodernity, and whatever else one might come across in the way of derivation.⁴

Utilizing a similar starting point, Linda Hutcheon, in the context of an introduction to a highly stimulating study of postmodernism in literature titled *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, claims:

Of all the terms bandied about in both current cultural theory and contemporary writing on the arts, postmodernism must be the most over- and under-defined.⁵

And, in a closely related book, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, first published in 1989, Hutcheon similarly begins:

Few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture than the word 'postmodernism.' As a result, any attempt to define the word will necessarily and simultaneously have both positive and negative dimensions.⁶

There must be something quite paradoxical and perplexing about a term that invites use, perhaps overuse, but which remains 'exasperating', 'under-defined', 'abused' and has simultaneously both 'positive and negative dimensions'. The section that follows will begin with an attempt to define postmodernism from one specific perspective and will then explore further some of the reasons why postmodernism appears 'exasperating', 'under-defined' and so on. We might not always resolve these

problems, to expect to do so might be a rather un-postmodernist way of thinking, but we can begin to understand how and why postmodernism might remain, perhaps must remain, both paradoxical and resistant, with the resistance to easy definition forming part of what postmodernism both means and represents. Accepting that resistance, and embracing the contradictions while suppressing any desire to seek an easy resolution, will go some way towards beginning to understand postmodernism. As Hutcheon suggests, 'postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory'.⁷

Lyotard – metanarrative – modernism

The most widely cited attempt to effectively pose the question of what postmodernism is was provided by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, and his position has been restated in many general texts on postmodernism. Lyotard began his intellectual development through a positive engagement with Marxism, the ideological project whose origins and development were closely intertwined with a modernist perspective. However, Lyotard, like many intellectuals of the post-1945 world, rather self-consciously distanced himself from that particular context.

Lyotard's most direct attempt to define and delineate postmodernism comes in a book titled *The Postmodern Condition*, first published in French in 1979 and then translated into English in 1984.⁸ However, although this is the text within which Lyotard outlines his highly influential account of postmodernism, the book is primarily about the condition and value of knowledge. As Stuart Sim, in summarizing Lyotard's position, states, 'knowledge is now the world's most significant commodity'.⁹ It could be argued that the commodity status of knowledge has now been further intensified through the development of some aspects of the Internet and related electronic media. Lyotard's discussion is positioned in relation to a scientific rather than cultural discourse, with science being framed by its own systems of knowledge and forms of legitimacy. These concerns are reflected in the quasi-scientific aura of the book's subtitle, 'A Report on Knowledge'.

Lyotard begins with a seemingly succinct definition of the modern:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.¹⁰

Clearly if we wish to understand postmodernism, which implies a going beyond of modernism, then we need to understand modernism as the point of departure, or rejection, a suggestion to which we will return. However, what Lyotard seems to

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posit as the modern here seems rather different from what we may understand by both modern and modernism, particularly in relation to music. For Lyotard, as suggested above, this argument seems to be about science rather than culture, but if we interpret Lyotard's science as a generally rigorous thought process rather than a specific scientific practice it can be transferred into other contexts, primarily cultural, a shift that has been made in a great deal of literature on Lyotard and postmodernism. Through the cultural implications of Lyotard's description of the modern we can see that what is being argued for here is the claim that such modern thinking defines itself, or justifies itself, through reference to something called a 'metadiscourse' which then appeals to 'some grand narrative'. It is clear that both sets of terminologies, 'metadiscourse' and 'grand narrative', have something in common in that both suggest the large scale – the meta of metadiscourse, the debate about the debate – and the narrative, the story that is being told, is grand. Therefore the modern, for Lyotard, appeals to, or is told via, the big, 'grand', narrative. In other words, there are large-scale stories that have been constructed by, and act as representations of, a modernist mindset. The examples Lyotard gives of such grand narratives may now appear to be rather obscure. But they look towards, for example, the Enlightenment, through the reference to 'the emancipation of the rational or working subject'. The eighteenth-century project of Enlightenment stands for the rejection of out-dated superstitions and the beginning of a modern awareness of knowledge through the projection of highly ambitious, perhaps utopian, aspirations of enlightened progress. The large-scale, universal nature of such claims and ambitions could therefore be read, through a process of generalization, in terms of Lyotard's metadiscourse and, with reference to its scale, the grand narrative. Other examples of such metanarratives, as the grand narrative is more routinely termed, would include the already mentioned ideology of Marxism, which aspired to conditions of universality and sought to project a powerful aura of historical progress as both radical and inevitable.

Although Lyotard's description of the modern now seems more accessible, it is notable that, as already highlighted, he does not use the more culturally specific term of modernism. Modernism represents the radical redefinition of art and culture in the early twentieth century and beyond. In terms of music, modernism is seen to define, for example, the music of both Schoenberg and Stravinsky, and subsequently later composers who continue a modernist legacy. In translating Lyotard's version of the modern, by implication modernism, into the context of music we can see that, for example, Schoenberg's 'emancipation of the dissonance', which distanced music from the conventions and traditions of tonality, followed by the development of serialism, which sought to rationalize musical content as defined by pitch, *could* be argued to represent musical versions of the attempted construction of modern metanarratives in that they are intentionally big ideas about the nature of music with large-scale historical, formal and stylistic implications.

Lyotard – micronarrative – postmodernism

Although it is clearly important to understand modernism in order to then interpret postmodernism, this understanding does not in itself provide a definition of postmodernism. But, having situated modernism in relation to such metanarratives, Lyotard moves towards defining postmodernism:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.¹¹

This really is ‘simplifying to the extreme’, and Lyotard’s use of deliberately direct language is an intentional point of contrast to the complexity of the surrounding context and related issues. However, the key point in this stage of the argument is the assertion that we become postmodern because we cannot believe in the large-scale stories, the metanarratives, both about modernism and told by modernism. We are now simply incredulous towards such ambitions and therefore cannot invest belief in them. On the basis of this incredulity we are rejecting a certain modern consciousness and ideology and in that moment of rejection we effectively become postmodern.

It would seem that if we seek a Lyotardian answer to the question of what is postmodernism then the answer might be that it is essentially a highly sceptical, critical attitude towards modernism, a move that is often represented as an ‘anti-modernism’. And yet this seems rather negative. To define postmodernism in this way seems only to say nothing more than that we are no longer modernists. At a later stage of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard effectively restates this argument:

We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives – we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse.¹²

Again science is invoked, but now with the assertion that the grand, metanarratives of, by implication, modernism, no longer have the value that was previously attached to them. In other words, in a postmodern context such narratives cannot act as a source of validation or legitimization. Lyotard continues:

But as we have seen, the little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention ...¹³

In other words, Lyotard is now arguing that if we cannot invest belief in the big ideas of modernism, the meta or grand narratives, what remains, in contrast to the large, is the small: the ‘little narrative’ (micronarrative) is now the primary form of ‘imaginative invention’. The focus is now shifted from the large to the small, and in making this move there is also a resulting shift from the singular (there cannot be that many potential metanarratives) to the plural. If the ‘little narrative’ is now

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primary there can of course be many such little narratives. This means, in effect, that there are now many stories to be told, and many different voices with which to tell them. These multiple stories, and voices, now suggest a culture made up of many different things: a plural and fragmented cultural, social and political landscape, with each fragmentary 'little narrative' potentially claiming its own identity and value without at any point coalescing into a larger totality. In other words, each 'little narrative' constructs its own sense of a self-contained legitimacy and place within a broad spectrum defined as postmodernism. The image of a shift in scale from the large to the small is also articulated in the work of another key thinker of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, who in his central book on postmodernism, *Fatal Strategies*, originally published in 1983, states that 'we are no longer in the age of grandiose collapses and resurrections ... but of little fractal events'.¹⁴

Following the above outline of what Lyotard leads us towards as an understanding of postmodernism we can now begin to at least address the question of what postmodernism is with the possible answer that postmodernism now provides us with a meaningful way of describing the loss of belief in the essential characteristics of modernism, becoming an important terminology that can envelop and reflect multiple voices and stories. In doing so it celebrates plurality, fragmentation and difference, and situates the self-contained legitimacy of many contrasting cultural ideas and practices. However, this 'answer' is framed only as a 'possible answer' because in a postmodernist context the provisional and the undecided will come to be interpreted as positive attributes in contrast to the allegedly rigid certainties and orthodoxies of the past as defined by modernism. For Victor Burgin the postmodern can only be understood as 'a complex of heterogeneous but interrelated questions which will not be silenced by any spuriously *unitary* answer'.¹⁵

The discussion thus far has addressed the question of what postmodernism is through reference to some key ideas from Lyotard's characterization of a post-modern condition. It has not provided a direct answer as such, but it has outlined the issues that inevitably come to the surface through the asking of the question. In conjunction with the problem of defining postmodernism comes the related question of when this proposed shift from modernism to postmodernism might have happened, or, at least, became evident.

When was postmodernism?

Lyotard's understanding of postmodernism also involves a critical retrospective reflection on the Enlightenment and modernism, both of which are now redefined as metanarratives, a move that positions both concepts as what had once been large-scale constructions but which have now lost their value. This reflection on both

concepts suggests a degree of historical distance through an effective rejection of the validity of these earlier concepts, a process of rejection that seems to push them ever further into the past. However, Lyotard does not really fix his argument with any real sense of historical precision or detail. Although he refers to broad concepts such as the modern and the Enlightenment that can be placed in a historical context, he does not search for supporting evidence in the specific details that can be contained within, and contribute to, these concepts. But clearly changes occur at certain moments and have either inspired or reflected the debates about the identification and nature of such broad categories. Postmodernism is also reflected through, and identified with, specific developments in the cultural, and other, spheres. These happened in real time and suggest the possibility that postmodernism not only reflects and articulates certain historical transformations but also has now become subject to historical change.

The proposed situating of postmodernism in broadly historical terms can be strongly reinforced by the realization that since the late 1970s and early 1980s the world has experienced some profound changes – the fall of Communism, the Internet, 9/11, among others – all of which could now have further implications for defining the condition of knowledge, culture and experience after modernism. The seemingly endless theorizing around the term and the fact that the key texts on postmodernism, not just that of Lyotard, were all written some time ago now reinforces this suggestion. Linda Hutcheon, in a revised version of *The Politics of Postmodernism* published in 2002, states that postmodernism is now ‘a thing of the past’, becoming ‘fully institutionalized, it has its canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and its histories’.¹⁶ If this was the case in 2002 it is even more evidently so now. Postmodernism not only creates a distance to the past through its rejection of modernism, but is now itself already historical, with Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* being a canonical text within that history.

Reference has already been made to Hans Bertens’s book and its intriguing title of *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*, a title that suggests an appropriate sense of historical distance to the emergence and development of the idea of postmodernism. It implies that the relationship between postmodernism and the culture defined and described by that idea can be considered through certain historical perspectives. Bertens provides a chronology of the debates about postmodernism and in effect positions a series of historical moments in relation to postmodernism. In doing so he also makes direct reference to various cultural contexts. For example, following a summary of some interesting early usages of postmodernism, Bertens goes on to position the music of John Cage, along with work of the painter Robert Rauschenberg and the dancer Merce Cunningham, as part of an ‘anti-modernist cultural revolt that gradually gained momentum in the 1950s’.¹⁷ This proposal not only situates the implied postmodernism of the suggested ‘anti-modernist cultural

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revolt' but directly and usefully connects the historical moment with a distinct set of cultural practices within the broader context and concept of an emergent postmodernism. Just as the actual practices and practitioners of modernism – Joyce, Picasso, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, among others – inform how we construct our retrospective, historical view of modernism, it is also the case that a similar process is necessary in understanding postmodernism. This encounter with specific cultural practices, in this case music, will underpin much of this book.

As well as looking for relevant historical and cultural signposts, it is also possible to position postmodernism as a new site of historical awareness, a possibility that is rigorously pursued by Fredric Jameson, most distinctly and significantly in a book titled *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, first published in 1991.¹⁸ Jameson's distinctive contribution to the postmodernism debate is to project an essentially Marxist understanding of the world, through reference to capitalism and globalization, in postmodernist terms. This grounds the debate in a certain social and historical reality, arguing for postmodernism as the cultural dominant in a late capitalist world, with the use of 'late' also suggesting a certain historical periodization. However, Jameson extends this historical perspective into an understanding of postmodernism that also involves thinking the present (postmodernism) in historical terms. He begins with the bold statement:

It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.¹⁹

This statement may remind us of the power of history, the situation of the past in the present, but it also highlights how that historical consciousness impacts on our sense of place within a rapidly changing world. It also begins to provide a fitting reflection of a number of examples of postmodernist architecture, literature, film and music within which an awareness of the past is defined through, for example, quotation of, and allusion to, styles and materials from many different, previous eras. Such creative practices and processes open windows on the past while simultaneously disrupting expectations of historical and, as will become evident, musical time. This reflection upon, and interaction with, the past is also distinct from what was perceived as a 'year-degree zero' mentality in some forms of modernism through the aura of a de-contextualized autonomy in which the individual work was perceived to exist in isolation. As will be explored in chapter 3, this version of modernism was highly influential in the post-war world of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The new postmodern form of 'thinking the present historically' and its realization within various different musical contexts will be explored further in subsequent chapters of this book.

In a move that is similar to Bertens's identification of a specific historical moment as defined through a set of specific cultural practices, Jameson goes on to provide a fascinating account of what he sees as the 'radical break' with modernism from which a postmodernism can retrospectively be seen to emerge:

The case for its [postmodernism's] existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s.²⁰

As was also argued for by Bertens the 1950s becomes significant, but for Jameson it is specifically the end of the decade, the point at which it slips into the 1960s, which is identified as this moment of great change. It is clear that a great deal begins to happen into the 1960s that is fundamentally different from what has come before, and positioning this difference within and through postmodernism becomes an interesting strategy.

If Jameson's account of the culture that emerges after, or through, the 'radical break' shifts the focus towards the 1960s and suggests a degree of historical specificity then a similar focus is also evident in the work of David Harvey. Writing from the perspective of an economic-based urban geography, Harvey begins his study of *The Condition of Postmodernity* with the outlining of his 'argument', the basic premise of the book, which begins with yet another bold statement:

There has been a sea-change in cultural as well as in political-economic practices since around 1972.²¹

This 'sea-change' will be defined via 'the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time'.²² Much of Harvey's project will involve often quite detailed discussions of changing experiences of space and time from the Enlightenment to what is termed 'time-space compression' in both modernism and postmodernism. This argument, as Harvey fashions it, involves a highly sophisticated theoretical understanding of changing economic conditions that are beyond the scope of this introduction. However, I will make regular reference back to Harvey's key points as outlined above, but such references will take the form of what I freely admit to be a loose, un-theorized translation into the context of music, in which much, if not all, of the music discussed in this book can be understood as in some way reflecting new experiences of space and time, even if our use of these terms might be rather different from how Harvey originally positioned them.

What is most immediately graspable about Harvey's statement in the immediate context of this chapter is its remarkable degree of historical precision. Marked by the onset of a world economic downturn instigated by rapid rises in oil prices, 1973 can be seen as the moment at which the utopian optimism of the 1960s finally disappeared and was replaced by new levels of pessimism within which, for example, nostalgia for a romanticized past becomes a new cultural mode. For Harvey, the

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‘sea-change’ as defined by 1972 becomes the historical marker for postmodernism. At the end of a chapter titled ‘Modernity and Modernism’, a highly stimulating and effective outline of modernism, Harvey concludes:

Though a failure, at least judged in its own terms, the movement of 1968 has to be viewed, however, as the cultural and political harbinger of the subsequent turn to postmodernism. Somewhere between 1968 and 1972, therefore, we see postmodernism emerge as a full-blown though still incoherent movement out of the chrysalis of the anti-modern movement of the 1960s.²³

The image of ‘revolution’ conjured by the events of 1968 in Paris, and other major cities, in which students and others confronted what was perceived to be a hostile, conservative establishment, ended inevitably in failure. This sense of failure not only provides a symbolic end to the 1960s but also had a direct impact on many intellectuals, including Lyotard and Baudrillard. From this moment, on the basis of Harvey’s interpretation, postmodernism emerges from a moment of ‘anti-modernism’ into a ‘full-blown though still incoherent movement’ in the early 1970s. Harvey’s use of ‘movement’ poses some difficult questions from within the context of postmodernism: does ‘the movement of 1968’ imply a level of intent? Does the ‘anti-modern movement of the 1960s’ suggest a coherence, even allowing for his qualification that the movement is still incoherent, that may actually be rather inconsistent with most characterizations of the fragmentary nature of postmodernism? However, what we most need to retain from Harvey’s account in this context is the sense of a distinct historical moment.

Interestingly this moment, and its proposed ‘anti-modernism’, seems quite different from that of Bertens’s suggestion of an anti-modernist revolt of the 1950s. For Jameson, the ‘radical break’ comes around the late 1950s into the 1960s, and that feels rather different from Harvey’s suggested historical space of ‘somewhere between 1968 and 1972’. While these subtle variations in chronology reflect both the fluidity of the shifting landscape of the period in general and the diversity and differences inherent within the debates and discussions around postmodernism, it is possible to bring these chronologies closer together into some form of coherent picture and suggest the following outline:

1950s: ‘anti-modernism’ (Bertens) – rejection of modernism

From which emerges

Late 1950s–early 1960s: ‘radical break’ (Jameson) – rupture between modernism and postmodernism

After which

1968–1972: ‘we see postmodernism emerge as a full-blown though still incoherent movement’ (Harvey)