

## Introduction

# Postmodernism and postmodernity

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There is an episode of *The Simpsons* in which the barman, Moe Szyslak, tries to transform his dingy bar into somewhere ‘cool’ and futuristic, decorating it with randomly chosen objects such as suspended rabbits and eyeballs. His regulars don’t get it. Faced with their non-comprehending stares, Moe explains: ‘It’s po-mo! . . . Post-modern! . . . Yeah, all right – weird for the sake of weird’ (‘Homer the Moe’, *Simpsons Archive*).

*The Simpsons* is widely considered one of the most exemplary postmodern texts because of its self-reflexive irony and intertextuality. But postmodernism is not weird for the sake of being weird. Nor is it simply ‘the contemporary’ or ‘the experimental’. It *may* be ‘avant-garde’ (though many critics, myself included, think it isn’t), or it may be a continuation of the values and techniques of modernism (but then again it may just as plausibly be a break with modernism). It may be an empty practice of recycling previous artistic styles . . . or a valid form of political critique.

Postmodernism is a notoriously slippery and indefinable term. It was originally coined in the 1940s to identify a reaction against the Modern movement in architecture. However, it first began to be widely used in the 1960s by American cultural critics and commentators such as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler who sought to describe a ‘new sensibility’ in literature which either rejected modernist attitudes and techniques or adapted or extended them. In the following decades the term began to figure in academic disciplines besides literary criticism and architecture – such as social theory, cultural and media studies, visual arts, philosophy, and history. Such wide-ranging usage meant that the term became overloaded with meaning, chiefly because it was being used to describe characteristics of the social and political landscape as well as a whole range of different examples of cultural production.

This begs the question: why has an obviously problematic term continued to be used? I think the reason is that there has been a genuine feeling amongst theorists, cultural commentators, artists and writers that our age, has, since the 1950s and 1960s onward (opinions vary as to when exactly), been shaped by significant alterations in society as a result of technology, economics and the

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media; that this has led to significant shifts in cultural and aesthetic production as a result, perhaps even (though these are even more difficult to measure) changes in the way people who exist in these changed conditions live, think, and feel. To try to capture this sense of change, vague and multi-faceted though it may be, is why the term postmodernism has been invented, adopted, defined and redefined.

More precisely, one of the key questions behind the postmodern debate is how the particular conditions of postmodernity differ from or have arisen from those of *modernity*. Theorists have tended to portray modernity (i.e. from early to mid-twentieth century) as increasingly industrialized, mechanized, urban, and bureaucratic, while postmodernity is the era of the 'space age', of consumerism, late capitalism, and, most recently, the dominance of the virtual and the digital. Such generalized portraits of modern and postmodern society have been paralleled by similar comparisons of the specific aesthetic styles which have dominated in these periods. Where modernist art forms privilege formalism, rationality, authenticity, depth, originality, etc., postmodernism, the argument goes, favours bricolage or pastiche to original production, the mixing of styles and genres, and the juxtaposition of 'low' with high culture. Where modernism is sincere or earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic.

The discussion in this book aims to move beyond such generalizations (and, in any case, after this chapter, will concentrate on prose fiction), but it is important to acknowledge that the question of how postmodernism relates to modernism remains a highly contentious one, not least because the term itself – 'post-modern' – implies, confusingly, that modernism has either been superseded or has entered a new phase.

The problems with the term postmodernism are complicated further because when reading about it we are actually dealing with three derivatives – not just 'postmodernity', but also 'postmodernism' and 'postmodern'. This latter term gives this book its title and is favoured throughout. 'Postmodern' is an adjective that refers both to a particular period in literary and perhaps cultural history (though this book is more interested in the former than the latter) which begins in the 1950s and continues until the 1990s (though inevitably there is disagreement about this too, as some would argue we are still in the postmodern period now), and to a set of aesthetic styles and principles which characterize literary production in this period and which are shaped by the context of postmodernism and postmodernity. Where 'postmodernity' refers to the way the world has changed in this period, due to developments in the political, social, economic, and media spheres, 'postmodernism' (and the related adjective 'postmodernist') refers to a set of ideas developed from philosophy and theory and related to aesthetic production. To provide a context

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for the discussion in the rest of the book, this chapter will now turn to a more in-depth consideration of prominent theoretical uses of these latter two terms.

## Postmodernity and 'late capitalism'

Postmodernity can be described most usefully in terms of the political and socio-economic systems which develop in what the Marxist thinker Ernest Mandel called the 'third stage' of capitalist expansion (Mandel, 1975).

In the period following the Second World War, the first two stages of capitalism, 'market capitalism' and 'monopoly (or imperialist) capitalism', were superseded by 'postindustrial' or 'late' capitalism. In effect late capitalism sees the accumulative logic of capitalism extend into every possible area of society, and into every corner of the globe, eliminating any remaining pockets of 'precapitalism'. It means that areas of society which were previously unaffected by the logic of the market, such as the media, the arts, or education became subject to the laws of capitalism (i.e. requiring growth, profits, and business models) and the advance of what we now call the 'globalization' of consumerism. The result of this is a cultural eclecticism, as summarized in a much-quoted sentence from the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard: 'one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong' (Lyotard, 1984, 76).

The key factor behind this expansion, as Larry McCaffrey has argued, is the rise of technology. As competition is so intense amongst multinational organisations, it follows that the most important resource of all – more than actual materials or products – is information which can be used for marketing, research, and production purposes. Ever more sophisticated means of gathering and analysing information, McCaffrey suggests, has meant that postmodern society has become increasingly 'high-tech', saturated by products such as medical supplies, weaponry, and surveillance technology (which protects the interests of multinational corporations) and consumer goods such as mobile phones, computers, plasma screen TVs, high-spec cars, etc.

McCaffrey argues that even more significant than these high-tech products are 'the rapid proliferation of technologically mass-produced "products" that are essentially *reproductions* or *abstractions* – images, advertising, information, memories, styles, simulated experiences' (McCaffrey, 1991b, 4) and which rely upon other technologically engineered products such as computers, television, digital music, etc. to package and transmit them to consumers. These

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are much cheaper to produce and consume than more tangible products, and are the speciality of the advertising, information, and the media/cultural industries.

The consequence of living in a postindustrial, information-driven, media/culture-saturated world, according to theorists of postmodernity, is that we have become alienated from those aspects of life we might consider authentic or *real*. While our working lives are still 'real' (we go to work and pay the bills) they are not as real as, say, farming or building a ship. Instead we spend most of our time at our desks in front of a computer screen processing 'information' of one kind or another, engaging with symbolic representations rather than real, tangible objects. Much of our leisure time is spent engaging in simulated experiences or consuming more information. Existence has become more 'virtual' than real.

## Baudrillard and simulation

We tend to think of 'virtual reality' in a 'sci-fi' sense as an experience to be available in the near future, once computers are sophisticated enough to enable us literally to inhabit a fake version of the world but interact with it as if it were real. It is conventionally imagined (curiously in terms of sado-masochistic fantasy) as a situation in which we don gloves, a helmet, or a suit and then interact with our real body in a fictional world. But as the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard has argued, we don't need to wait for these devices to be possible: virtual reality is already here, and we all live in it almost every moment of our lives (Baudrillard, 1994a). We 'experience' the world through TV news or 'reality TV' shows, engage with other people we have never met (in internet chatrooms, or in our fascination with celebrities), use e-mail to communicate virtually to real people.

Central to Baudrillard's theory is the idea that we have entered a new phase of history, though he develops this thesis in a different and rather idiosyncratic way from Marxist thinkers like Mandel. What characterizes our world is that the last traces of the 'symbolic structure' that reigned in the pre-industrial world are disappearing. Baudrillard here draws on the economic theory of Marcel Mauss. Mauss's famous work *The Gift* (1953) explores the way primitive society was founded upon the logic of the gift-exchange rather than commodity-exchange. Where commodity-exchange is a system that works according to the exchange of goods for money, gift-exchange involves a threeway system of obligation: the gift must be given, received, and reciprocated. Most importantly, reciprocation means effectively giving back more than is received, in order to avoid the

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receiver being placed in an inferior position to the giver and to ensure that the triangular pattern of exchange may continue (Mauss, 2001).

In early societies this logic underscored every aspect of life, from harvest festivals to military service to weddings, and meant that even people could be gifts. Where Mauss believed that remnants of this economy still operate in our own money economy (e.g. weddings, dinner parties), though they have largely been replaced by a formalized notion of commodity-exchange, for Baudrillard this form of symbolic exchange has died out completely. Now there is only the endless and meaningless exchange of *signs*, which are even less 'real' and more ambiguous than commodities or currency (often they are images or words): everything can be exchanged for everything else, every sign is potentially interchangeable, reversible. There is no surplus element as there was in symbolic exchange.

Baudrillard's term for this overall interchangeability of signs is 'the code'. Its function is to 'codify' reality according to the 'law of value'. In other words it establishes a system of signs which provides (or tries to provide) everything with a meaning and a value relative to other things. It establishes the binary oppositions upon which Western culture is founded (life over death, good over evil, cause over effect) and produces an apparent stability in essences, identity, difference, and meaning. In this way the code actually *produces* reality: we experience the world through the sign-system of values set down in its underlying metaphysic.

The special ability of the code is to duplicate things so that the copy is indistinguishable from and indeed replaces the original. It is visible in science (in biology or DNA) and in computer and information technology which enables perfect reproduction (e.g. of biological tissue or of a photographic image). Previously, copying something that is real resulted in a version of the real thing which was still recognizable as a copy. Yet because the code can produce an exact replica, the difference between the original and the copy is eliminated. This effect is a typical one in contemporary culture which is characterized by a process of reproduction Baudrillard terms simulation. He points to numerous instances in the contemporary world in which the ability to distinguish between the real and representation is compromised: for example, Disneyland, opinion polls, President Nixon, Michael Jackson. Perhaps the most powerful example is the way that the actual events of twentieth-century warfare have become replaced by their representations: we 'consume' the representations as if they are real. The Vietnam War, the Gulf War, even, retrospectively, the Holocaust, are visible only in simulated form: with Vietnam, Baudrillard argues, 'the war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common haemorrhage into technology' (Baudrillard, 1994b, 59).

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Baudrillard's idea of simulation is often assumed to be the state of affairs when we engage somehow with a representation rather than the real thing. So that if one drinks a synthetic version of Irish beer in an Irish theme pub, one may be comically seen as consuming the hyperreal rather than the real. In fact, simulation refers to the process by which the technologies which dominate the contemporary world attempt to make aspects of the real, natural world around us into tangible, distinct entities. Paradoxically simulation tries to make the real properly *real* by attempting to explain everything in the world, eliminating mystery and the unexplained, and dividing the world up into a system of oppositions, differences, and values. Simulation does not just eliminate the real, it creates it.

## Poststructuralism, postmodernism, and 'the real'

The idea that postmodernity separates human beings from 'the real' has important resonances with poststructuralism, a theoretical movement which has been hugely influential in literary studies (and other humanities disciplines) in recent decades, and which, like the work of Baudrillard, revolves around the separation of the realm of language from the real world.

It is important not to overplay the link between postmodernism and poststructuralism as some do and regard them as being 'really' the same, or the former having emerged out of the latter. Poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault are sometimes, erroneously, co-opted into the roll-call of postmodern theorists. As Brian McHale has put it, 'poststructuralism and postmodernism are more like cousins than parent and child' (McHale and Neagu, 2006, n.p.)

It is unnecessary here to consider the similarities and differences between postmodernism and poststructuralism beyond stating generally that poststructuralism favours a creative approach to interpreting the literary or artistic text that demonstrates how its meanings are always multiple and deferred rather than fixed, and this is in tune with the 'postmodern' approach to interpreting texts (considered in more depth in the next chapter).

But we can note here that one way in which postmodernism is indeed 'poststructuralist' is because in problematizing the question of 'the real' it signals that it comes after *structuralism*, the implications of which also triggered poststructuralist theory. The theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the linguist whose ideas are the starting-point for structuralist theory, emphasize that language and the world are always separate, and the gap between them impossible to bridge. Saussure's theory argued that language was a system made up of signs.

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He defined the sign as composed of two elements: the 'signifier', a distinctive combination of sounds or images (i.e. a word or a visual image), and the 'signified', the concept or definition that the signifier calls to mind. The signifier and the signified are yoked together arbitrarily (there is no reason why a book should have this name rather than a 'rook' or a 'magazine') but once connected they could not be divorced because for language to function as a form of social communication agreed meanings have to be maintained. Language works principally by convention.

The real implication of Saussure's theory is that language doesn't *need* the world to function; it works independently of it. What this means is that when someone is speaking about a real thing he or she is only understood because of the code of the signifier. So if I point at a book and say 'this book', the reason you understand what I am referring to is actually not because of 'the referent' (the actual book I may be pointing at) but because you comprehend the *signifieds* evoked by the signifiers 'this' and 'book'.

Saussure's ideas would seem to offer a foundation for the postmodern conviction, articulated most powerfully in the theories of Baudrillard (even though he was strongly critical of Saussure) that we inhabit a virtual world always already divorced from the real. In postmodernity, to quote Baudrillard, the map 'precedes the territory': in other words reality is determined by its simulated version. More directly relevant to postmodern fiction (as we shall see in the following chapter) is the structuralist idea that meaning is derived from the relations between elements in the system rather than their capacity to refer to something outside it. A book gains its meaning from how it differs from other terms both phonetically (i.e. it is not a rook or a boot) and conceptually (it is not a magazine or a leaflet) rather than inherent value: this is what Saussure meant when he described language as a 'system of differences with no positive terms' (Saussure, 1966, 120). This provides a theoretical underpinning for the idea which preoccupies postmodern fiction, that specific words in a literary text mean what they mean because of how they relate to other words in the text and to other literary texts rather than how they relate to the real world.

As the work of poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser demonstrates, Saussure's theory also has profound implications for the way we conceive of human subjectivity. Indeed the very notion of the human 'subject', unlike the humanist idea of the autonomous 'self', emphasizes how we exist in the world as a kind of linguistic unit in a sentence, our 'meaning' derived from our position in the overall system rather than any inherent substance. The most powerful development of this idea is Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of how we derive identity from our position in what he calls the 'symbolic order', the system of 'meanings', codes, conventions, and rules that structure society.

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We only gain a meaningful identity once we are inscribed in the symbolic order – most obviously because we are given a name, but also because our actions and assertions of identity can only signify in the terms of an agreed-upon network of signification. But entering the symbolic order separates us from ‘the real’ (our bodily drives) and means that everyday life is essentially virtual as everything real is made recognizable and meaningful by language and the codes of the symbolic order.

The outcome is the creation of desire and the unconscious and the whole symptomatology of neurosis and psychosis which are the special objects of psychoanalysis and are determined by our efforts to deal with what cannot be ‘symbolized’ (i.e. what does not ‘make sense’ to everyday reality, such as trauma or death). The most ‘postmodern’ articulation of this state of affairs is provided by the Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, whose work emphasizes how everyday reality – the world of our name, our consciousness and our social identity – is nothing but a necessary fiction which is designed to keep our *real* selves (i.e. the inaccessible part of ourselves located in unconscious) at bay (Žižek, 1991).

## Sociology and the construction of reality

There is an interesting convergence between the Lacanian presentation of reality as a necessary fiction and sociological (and non-structuralist) theories about the ‘social construction of reality’ which have been used by some literary theorists (Waugh, 1984, 51–3; McHale 1987, 36–9) to provide a context for the self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction. Most influential of these is Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s idea that reality is not ‘given’ but is a fiction that we collectively subscribe to (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Reality is manufactured as a result of the interaction between given elements of the world and social convention, language, and individual vision. This produces a fairly stable version of reality which we inhabit in everyday life – what Berger and Luckmann call ‘paramount reality’ – though they contend that contemporary reality is especially subject to being reimagined and reshaped.

The idea that it is more accurate to speak of multiple *realities* in the post-modern world than a single reality is developed by Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor in their 1976 book *Escape Attempts*. Their study explores how we continually ‘escape’ from the world of paramount reality to inhabit other realities, which we project as we engage in different social activities, for example, reading about celebrities in newspapers, planning a holiday, playing games, watching a film, having sex, etc. In a world increasingly dominated by advertising, pop



culture and the media it means that ‘miniature escape fantasies’ are constantly available to us and switching from one to another effectively turns us into ‘split personalities’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992, 139).

## Jameson and the crisis in historicity

The experience of being ‘split off’ from reality, living in a ‘hyperreal’ world (Baudrillard’s term for the culture in which the logic of simulation has become all-pervasive) might be expected to have profound consequences for the way we live – the way we *feel*, in other words. Indeed a loss of reality is a symptom of a range of psychic disorders, from mild depression to full-blown psychosis. This seems to explain a peculiar tendency amongst theorists of the postmodern to employ the language of mental disorder to describe its effects. Postmodernity has been described as ‘schizophrenic’ (Jameson, 1991), ‘multiphrenic’ (Gergen, 1992), ‘telephrenic’ (Gottschalk, 2000), depressive and nihilistic (Levin, 1987), paranoid (Burgin, 1990; Frank, 1992; Brennan, 2004), and liable to induce in those who live in it ‘low-level fear’ (Massumi, 1993), or ‘panic’ (Kroker and Cook, 1988).

This psychopathological terminology is easily explained, on one level, by the fact that the majority of theorists of postmodernism and postmodernity have tended to regard their effects as harmful. Most prominent of these is the Marxist thinker Fredric Jameson, whose diagnosis of postmodernism trumps all other theorists of the postmodern in its references to pathological conditions, associating the phenomenon with schizophrenia, hysteria, nostalgia, paranoia, and a ‘waning of affect’.

Highly rhetorical as Jameson’s style is, there is substance to it. His diagnosis is backed up with an extensive analysis of the impact of the conditions of late capitalism on individual perceptive and cognitive faculties. The starting-point for his analysis is that postmodernism heralds the death of one particular version of the subject: ‘the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual’ which existed in the period of ‘classical capitalism and the nuclear family’ has been dissolved ‘in the world of organizational bureaucracy’ (Jameson, 1991, 15). The result is that, in art, the kind of expression of anxiety which was typical of modernism (‘alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation’), and is represented by a modernist artwork such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, has been replaced by a more general reflection of ‘intensities’, feelings which besiege postmodern subjects and are ‘free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria’ (Jameson, 1991, 16).

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More than any other thinker Jameson is responsible for making the link between postmodernity and the third stage of capitalism, as is shown by the title of his influential book, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Postmodernism, for Jameson, equates purely and simply to the effects of late capitalism on contemporary culture.

Central to his argument is his view that late capitalism has created a 'perpetual present' where time is dominated by the free-floating rhythms of the new electronic media. The result is that our apprehension of past and future is seriously weakened. Cultural production and consumption in postmodernity reveals that we are unable to place ourselves in a properly *historical* context. History has become simply a matter of 'styles' which can be pastiched in the latest retro clothes or 'theme pubs' or in 'nostalgia films' like Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) – a historical film which Jameson thinks bears no reliable traces of history (Jameson, 1991, 19–20). Postmodernism, for Jameson, is characterized by the 'random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion' (18). In terms of aesthetic technique, it means a preference for pastiche over parody. Both are devices which mimic a 'peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style'. But where parody has 'ulterior motives', namely a critical, satirical impulse, a commitment to making viewer or reader laugh, and retains the 'conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists', pastiche does not. It is simply 'blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs' (Jameson, 1991, 18), a kind of reflex aping process devoid of any sense of critical distance.

This state of affairs does not simply pertain in popular culture but in the most serious art and literature. E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* (1975) is regarded by some (such as Linda Hutcheon) as an example of 'historiographic metafiction', a novel which powerfully interrogates our knowledge of the past. But for Jameson the novel is written in such a way as to 'short-circuit an older type of social–historical interpretation' (Jameson, 1991, 23) and ensure that its self-reflexive direction of the reader towards his or her own methods of knowing history prevents it from presenting its historical period with sufficient depth.

The problem is that postmodernism – or the cultural logic of late capitalism – has swallowed everything and it is impossible simply to ignore or extinguish it. This means that cultural production is unable to mount a critique of postmodernism because it inevitably conforms to its logic itself. From a Jamesonian perspective, Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991), is on the face of it a critique of late twentieth-century capitalism and its rampant commodification. But because its language so obsessively mimics the language of 1980s consumer culture and continually name-checks its products, all it can