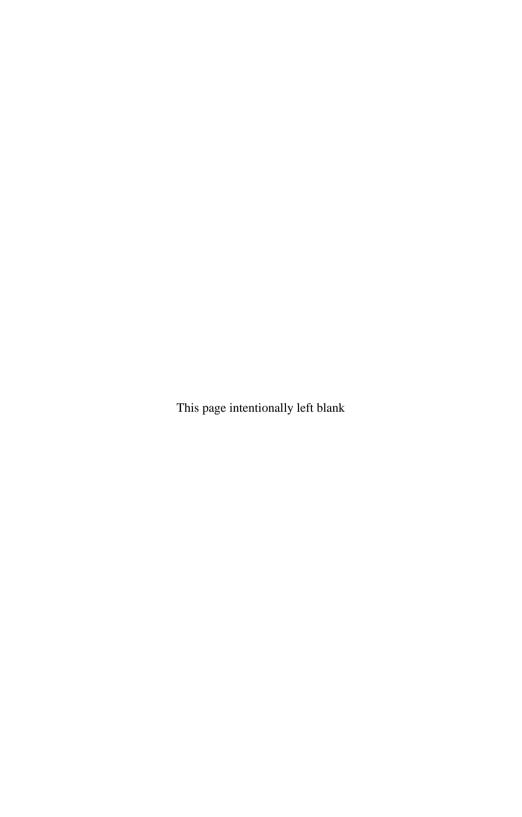# Fifty Key
Postmodern Thinkers

Stuart Sim

FIFTY KEY POSTMODERN THINKERS

Postmodernism is an important part of the cultural landscape which continues to evolve, yet the ideas and theories surrounding the subject can be diverse and difficult to understand. *Fifty Key Postmodern Thinkers* critically examines the work of fifty of the most important theorists within the postmodern movement who have defined and shaped the field, bringing together their key ideas in an accessible format. Drawing on figures from a wide range of subject areas, including literature, cultural theory, philosophy, sociology and architecture, those covered include:

- John Barth
- Umberto Eco
- Slavoj Žižek
- Cindy Sherman
- Jean-François Lyotard
- Charles Jencks
- Jacques Derrida
- Homi K. Bhabha
- Quentin Tarantino

Each entry examines the thinker's career, key contributions and theories, and refers to their major works. A valuable resource for those studying postmodern ideas at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, this text will appeal across the humanities and social sciences.

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FIFTY KEY POSTMODERN THINKERS

THINKERS

Stuart Sim

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INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism has been part of the cultural landscape for quite some time now, but with many of the major theorists identified with it having died in the last few years (Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, for example), the time seems ripe for a reassessment of their work as well as a reconsideration of who should be included in any survey of the phenomenon's history. Modernity itself as a socio-economic movement is under considerable strain since the credit crisis of 2007–8, which has thrown into doubt its ability to go on delivering the socio-economic progress that is its driving force and the major basis of its public appeal. That makes it all the more topical to look again at those figures who were critical of modernity's stranglehold on world culture, and of the 'Enlightenment project' in general, in the decades leading up to what is still as I write an unresolved crisis seriously threatening the global economy. *Fifty Key Postmodern Thinkers* therefore concentrates on figures working in a wide variety of fields in the later twentieth century, when postmodernism as it is now understood came to have a high profile in popular culture and the public consciousness.

There are forty-six standard-length entries (*c.* 1,900–2,000 words), and two longer; the latter to accommodate thinkers best known for their collaborative work, but who also have substantial bodies of work published under their own name – namely, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Each entry will include the following: an exposition of the thinker's key concepts; references to their main works and consideration of their impact; a select bibliography of their main works (ten maximum in order not to curtail the coverage of the entry unduly); plus a list of references of other texts mentioned in the entry. The entries are alphabetically arranged, from Adorno through to Žižek.

The volume ranges across philosophy, politics, social theory, psychology, anthropology, religion, feminism, science and the arts in general, to demonstrate the scope of postmodernism as a movement

of ideas and the inspiration it gave to cultural critique in the later twentieth century and then on into the twenty-first. The aim is to show that the critique offered by the movement's major figures is as relevant today as it was when it first broke into the public domain back in the 1970s and 1980s, and that it was always far more than a short-lived cultural trend that has now run its course. Indeed, the ideas of those thinkers covered represent an important contribution to the history of scepticism as a cultural phenomenon, with its notably anti-authoritarian, counter-cultural bias from the days of classical Greek philosophy onwards (for more on postmodernism's debt to scepticism, see Sim 2001, 2006). Above all else, postmodernists are sceptical in attitude and spirit: sceptical towards the claims of modernity and modernism to be the best, indeed only, method of organising society; sceptical of the claims made by authorities in general and determined to bring these to public attention wherever possible.

The figures covered here have been chosen to represent their particular fields and by no means exhaust those who could be included under the heading of the postmodern: many other names are mentioned over the course of the volume, but clearly a selection had to be made and this has been done in the first instance on chronological principles. Theodor W. Adorno is the furthest back in the past the selection goes, as his ideas, especially in his later career, strikingly prefigure the postmodern and indeed have set some of the terms of debate amongst theorists there. Adorno, along with his Frankfurt School colleague Max Horkheimer, specifically called into question the Enlightenment's influence and achievements in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), setting the tone for what was to become a concerted critique of it by the poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists in the later twentieth century. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966) also stands as a key work in the development of post-Marxism by what is effectively its deconstruction of one of the most basic building blocks of Marxism as a system of thought, a teleological dialectic: it seems entirely appropriate, therefore, that it is Adorno who leads off the entries.

The decision was made to concentrate on the twentieth century and not to go further back than Adorno, since earlier figures who have also strongly influenced postmodern thought – Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche spring most readily to mind in this context – properly speaking belong to other intellectual traditions. To include such as those in the present volume would have been to weaken the specifically postmodern slant of the project at the expense of influences whose work has often been substantially reinterpreted

by postmodern thinkers to fit their own objectives. Postmodern theorists are generally more post-Marxist than Marxist in their philosophical and political orientation, and Kant would hardly have approved of his ideas being appropriated, as they have been by the postmodern community, to undermine rather than reinforce the role of reason in human affairs. Everyone given an entry can claim a direct role in helping to form what we now call postmodern thought, although reference will also be made, where appropriate, to the sources of their ideas in cultural history. The second principle of selection has been to cast the net as widely as possible over academic, intellectual and artistic disciplines in order to demonstrate the very considerable breadth of postmodern thought, the implications of which soon became apparent across the entire cultural spectrum from those working in the arts through to those in the sciences. The artists, musicians and writers chosen for inclusion here are to be considered as leading examples of their fields, rather than as isolated figures who happen to display some characteristics of the postmodern aesthetic in their work.

It is a point worth making, too, that many of the figures here rejected the label of 'postmodernist', and that there is no such thing as a defined postmodernist movement – except perhaps in the field of architecture (as I will explain in more detail below; readers are also referred to the Charles Jencks entry). There is, however, a definable condition of postmodernity, and all the figures included in the volume have contributed significantly to our understanding of this phenomenon, and stand in some kind of critical relation to its predecessor, modernity. It is that critical relation I take to be most important, and through their articulation of it these thinkers have, in their varied ways, helped to shape what we mean by postmodernity and the postmodern, hence their inclusion. Every effort will be made to cross-reference between these thinkers, to show the connections that can be made between them that do suggest a common set of concerns running throughout their work.

Defining and contextualising the postmodern

Although the notion of the postmodern has been around since the later nineteenth century, it is only in the latter part of the twentieth that it comes to take on its current meaning of a reaction against modernity and modernism, to the extent of constituting an anti-modernism in some respects. Earlier uses had generally meant by it something more like ultra-modern, often with the connotation that

this was an undesirable cultural development that was not in the public's best interests to have occurred. Thus for the historian Arnold Toynbee postmodernity signalled cultural decline (see Toynbee 1954); for the theologian Bernard Iddings Bell it signalled spiritual decline (see Bell 1926, 1939). By the mid-twentieth century, however, it was taking on more favourable connotations within the field of architecture, although it still implied a condition of ultra-modernity, as it did for such as the architect and academic Joseph Hudnut, for whom it was the face of the future in the brave new world following World War Two. This was to be a world where houses would be the product of 'a collective-industrial scheme of life' (Hudnut 1949: 119) that their owners fully supported.

It was within the field of architecture that postmodernism's current meaning of a reaction against a particular style and cultural formation eventually took shape. Charles Jencks was one of the major theorists of this architectural turn, recommending adoption of the concept of 'double-coding' (Jencks 1991: 12), whereby architects would make a conscious effort to appeal to the general public rather than just to their architectural peers, designing buildings which contained something of interest to both constituencies. This tended to take the form of a self-conscious eclecticism, by which styles old and new were freely mixed, often in a humorous and more than somewhat ironic fashion, and it is the style of architecture currently holding sway within the profession, with examples of it multiplying throughout the world's major cities and urban areas. Pastiche became a term of praise for postmodern architectural practitioners, whereas it would have been regarded as a pointed criticism instead by their modernist predecessors, for whom it would have signalled creative laziness because of a failure to break away from tradition. And indeed it can still generate complaint on that latter score: 'I have read that under the name of postmodernism, architects are getting rid of the Bauhaus project, throwing out the baby of experimentation with the bathwater of functionalism' (Lyotard 1984: 71). The complainant in this instance is the famed author of *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard, whose relationship to the postmodern is admittedly never less than complex, but it does indicate an unease about any possible demonisation of the new in the emerging postmodern aesthetic.

Despite the reservations of Lyotard, and of others like the literary theorist Brian McHale, who argued that the term 'late modernist' (McHale 1992: 206) would more accurately describe texts that would qualify as postmodernist under Jencks's theory, double-coding soon spread into the other arts to become a major element in postmodern

aesthetics. Creative artists took it to require setting up a dialogue with the past, and a great many of them plunged into the method with enthusiasm. Modernist aesthetics, on the other hand, tended towards a rejection of past styles in the name of originality and experimentation, which were considered to be central to the individual artistic vision. Postmodernist artists were actively encouraged to revive and imitate older styles, again often with a humorous and ironic touch to show that they were aware that times had changed and that it was not just a case of straight imitation on their part. Pastiche was much in evidence, with styles being freely juxtaposed with each other to make apparent the artist's double-coding credentials. The goal was the same as in architecture, however, that is to widen the reach of the artist's work by offering the general public something familiar with which they could readily identify. It was to be in the way that forms were mixed and handled that the creative artist's appeal to their peers would now lie, rather than in the creation of new and original, and to a general audience often mystifying and incomprehensible, forms.

But the postmodern was much more than just an aesthetic movement: it resonated through pretty well all areas of life in the West, and came to take on a specific political meaning of challenging authority and the power that it claimed to have. It is entirely possible to speak of a distinctively postmodern form of politics, in which Lyotard's idea of the 'little narrative' (Lyotard 1984: 60) looms large. Little narratives were Lyotard's answer to the question of how concerned individuals could set about resisting the overweening power of 'grand narratives' or 'metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984: xxiii, xxiv), with their entrenched institutional power bases. The latter constituted centres of ideological power that set the rules and regulations by which societies operated; the former were loosely organised groupings which protested against the abuse of power by grand narratives, and were conceived of as temporary rather than permanent formations, designed for specific short-term rather than long-term objectives. Again, what is to be recognised is the rejection of centralised authority on sceptical grounds, a demand that power be more generally devolved down the social chain and be open to challenge and debate at all times, not assumed as of right according to traditional norms.
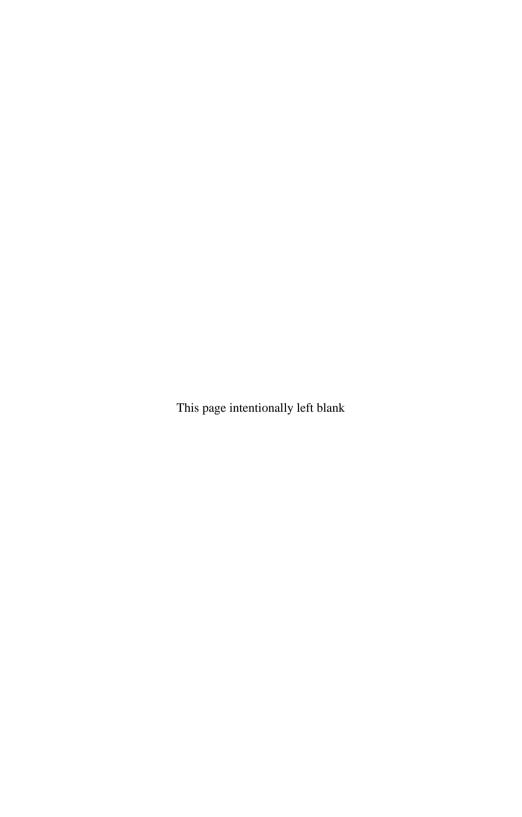
Some theorists, however, have argued that the postmodern was no more than a passing cultural fancy and that its time has come and gone; perhaps even that it can now be declared officially dead (see, for example, Kirby 2006). But while this may be true as an artistic

style, where it is fair to say that it is has become somewhat hackneyed and predictable, it is manifestly not so when it comes to ideology. The credit crisis can be interpreted as a failure, not just of neoliberal economics, but of modernity as a project, and most particularly of the authorities behind modernity running back through the 'narrative of emancipation' (Lyotard 1984: 37) that is the foundation of the Enlightenment project (this is a topic discussed in detail in Sim 2010 and Bourriaud 2009). As Lyotard so boldly put it in *The Postmodern Condition*, we can 'no longer have recourse' (Lyotard 1984: 60) to such metanarratives; their credibility has to be called seriously into question. Given the ongoing trials of the global economy the critique offered by postmodernism continues to resonate, and certainly the work of the fifty figures highlighted in this volume still does so to great effect throughout their respective fields. The postmodern condition is still with us, therefore, although it has proved to be even more fraught with problems than Lyotard envisaged in his essentially optimistic vision of it as the basis for a new and fairer world ideological order. The sceptical outlook for which Lyotard became such a high-profile standard bearer in *The Postmodern Condition* is still very much needed in a situation where politicians cannot quite seem to shake off their faith in modernity's progress-based programme as the only way to proceed. As long as that remains the case, then postmodern thought will have an important contribution to make in the wider cultural arena.

I would emphasise again the factor of diversity when dealing with the postmodern. Except in terms of aesthetics it has never been a movement with a precise agenda, being more of a reaction to a world in which ideology (for which read grand narrative) has become a repressive mechanism dedicated to maintaining the political status quo. While there are common features that emerge from this reaction, that does not mean there is agreement between these various thinkers as to how to bring about cultural change: there is a diffuseness about the postmodern that has to be acknowledged. Just as there were 'modernisms', so we have to realise that there are 'postmodernisms', and that there will be subtle differences in their agenda and methods in reacting to modernity and modernism. Nevertheless, the reaction is very real and all the thinkers are united in their dislike of authoritarianism and the system that enforces this. Bearing all that in mind, we can now consider how fifty prominent figures have addressed this issue within their own particular fields of interest in the last few decades – and why they have felt the need to do so.

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FIFTY KEY POSTMODERN THINKERS

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THEODOR W. ADORNO (1903–69)

Adorno was one of the leading figures in the Frankfurt School of Social Research, a Marxist-influenced grouping based at Frankfurt University, which flourished in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s until it relocated in America after Adorno and his associates found themselves forced to flee the country by the Nazi takeover in 1933. After World War Two the School returned to Germany, although another key member, Herbert Marcuse, chose to remain in America, where he soon became a focal point for a new generation of political radicals through works such as *One Dimensional Man*. The School developed an analytical method known as 'critical theory', a blend of philosophy and sociology which they applied across the cultural spectrum: in effect, they were pioneering what has subsequently become known as 'cultural studies'. Adorno's writing, for example, comprises philosophy, social theory and aesthetics, often in colla-boration with his Frankfurt School colleague Max Horkheimer. Much of Adorno's later work is highly critical of Marxism, and could be described as post-Marxist in orientation, making him an inspiration for early poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers (Jacques Derrida as a case in point), who picked up on Adorno's deep distrust of authoritarian political systems and the absolutist philosophical bias of Marxism. Such anti-authoritarianism and anti-absolutism were to become intrinsic to the postmodern outlook, which progressively has distanced itself from Marxism, regarding it as having been superseded by historical events. The point made by Martin Jay that it could be argued that 'Adorno was an ambitious failure, at least from the per-spective of those who want solid and unequivocal answers to the questions they pose' (Jay 1984: 163), is precisely what marks him out as a critical source for the postmodern.

   Adorno and Horkheimer's most famous collaboration is *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during World War Two. It is a book which is, not surprisingly, highly critical of the state of the world, and in par-ticular the authoritarian socio-political systems which had developed between the two world wars, such as fascism and communism. These are claimed to represent the logical conclusion of the Enlightenment project of continual human progress, and as the authors acidly remark: 'In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened Earth radiates disaster triumphant' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 3). Effectively, that constitutes the opening salvo in what is to become a sustained

poststructuralist and postmodernist campaign against the way the Enlightenment project has developed, and in particular the 'grand narratives' (or ideological systems) that have emerged from its cumulative influence in Western culture since the eighteenth century.

For Adorno and Horkheimer the commitment to liberation and progress had led instead to totalitarianism, with its belief that it knew best how to achieve those goals on behalf of humanity (more specifically perhaps, that its leaders, such as Hitler and Stalin, knew best and could force compliance with their programmes on those grounds). Neither are Adorno and Horkheimer much more sanguine about the alternative offered by Western liberal democracy, treating this as little better than a mirror-image of those authoritarian systems in its insistence that it constituted the ultimate answer to all our socio-political needs, an all-purpose grand narrative in its own right. All such systems demanded complete commitment and adherence to the cause from their followers and dismissed the claims to validity of all others: 'The choice by an individual citizen of the Communist or Fascist ticket is determined by the influence which the Red Army or the laboratories of the West have on him. … The person who has doubts is already outlawed as a deserter' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 205). Such an outcome was hardly what the proponents of Enlightenment had envisaged when they set out to undermine the oppressive *ancien régime* in eighteenth-century Europe, but a similarly negative view of the Enlightenment project is to become a defining feature of postmodern thought. Eventually, Adorno is to hold the Enlightenment responsible for 'Auschwitz'; the term standing for all the horrors perpetrated in the Holocaust.

Auschwitz becomes deeply symbolic of the Enlightenment project for Adorno, demonstrating the degree of inhumanity, up to outright barbarism, that its latter-day proponents are capable of inflicting in pursuit of their objectives. After an event of this magnitude, he suggests, it is all but impossible to engage in activities such as the creative arts; it is as if the higher ideals of humanity have been irretrievably compromised and it would be false to pretend that we can go on as before: 'Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today' (Adorno 1981: 34). Auschwitz has left a permanent mark on Western civilisation, to the extent that Adorno can even find himself wondering 'whether one can *live* after Auschwitz' (Adorno 2003: 435). He goes on to insist that steps have to be taken to prevent a recurrence of such barbarism: 'The premier

demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. Its priority before any other requirement is such that I believe I need not and should not justify it' (Adorno 2003: 19). (Lyotard is later to reach a similar conclusion about the impact of the Holocaust in works like *Heidegger and 'the Jews'*, arguing that it would be an act of bad faith ever to allow oneself to 'forget' such an event had occurred, and that many Germans were indeed guilty of just this sin – notably, from Lyotard's perspective, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, a critical influence on postwar French philosophy.)

Adorno also wrote extensively on aesthetic matters, particularly music, as in his *Philosophy of Modern Music*, in which he strongly defended the musical style of Arnold Schoenberg against that of other contemporary composers such as Igor Stravinsky. Schoenberg's compositional style, serialism (or 'twelve-tone' music, as it is also known), was for Adorno a revolutionary method, whilst Stravinsky's early ballets such as *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* presented a picture of the human race as ontologically, rather than ideologically, alienated, and thus were to be considered reactionary since their story-lines seemed to rule out the possibility of political change (one might question the comparison of a ballet score to Schoenberg's generally more abstract orchestral work, however). In the event, Stravinsky has proved to be by far the more popular of the two composers, and Adorno's defence of serialism, a style deliberately breaking with the Western classical music tradition by refusing to adhere to its system of tonality controlled by seven-note scales, cultivating 'atonality' instead, marks him out as a modernist sympathiser rather than a precursor of the postmodern. (Martin Jay has even defined Adorno's dense and complicated writing, often criticised by commentators, as 'atonal philosophy' (Jay 1984: 56).) Postmodern composers are quite happy to use standard tonality (as in the work of Philip Glass or Steve Reich, for example), and regard this as a way of reconnecting with an audience which never showed much enthusiasm for serialism anyway. Indeed, serialism has all but died out as a musical style and the works of its major composers do not feature very prominently in concert-hall programmes.

Adorno's pro-serialism views also very much differentiate him from the main trends of the time in Marxist aesthetics, such as socialist realism, with its campaign against formal experimentation and insistence on the use of older styles with a more obviously popular impact. To that tradition, Schoenberg's style was elitist and did nothing to further the cause of proletarian revolution, therefore Soviet composers were banned from adopting the serial method and

required to use standard tonality in all their works. Any hint of dissonance at all was disallowed by the Soviet authorities, never mind the persistent presence of it in the work of the early serial school – namely, Schoenberg and his composition pupils Alban Berg and Anton Webern. In Adorno's view, however, Schoenberg represented 'progress' (Adorno 1973: 29), having so uncompromisingly broken from traditional musical practice in the West and created an entirely new method of composition. Adorno's Marxism is never less than iconoclastic, and it is not difficult to see why he ultimately feels the need to question some of the theory's most fundamental principles, such as the nature of the dialectic.

The work of Adorno's which more than any other signals towards postmodern thought is *Negative Dialectics*, which is a broadside against Marxism and all other totalising forms of philosophy, prefiguring one of the central concerns of postmodernism. Marxism takes over the concept of totality from Hegelian philosophy and similarly sees the dialectic as having a specific end-goal, although of course this is very different in Marxism than it is in Hegelianism, being materialistically rather than metaphysically inclined: dialectical materialism as opposed to dialectical idealism. So for Hegel the world spirit eventually realises itself in the perfect society (symbolised for him by the Prussian state, in which he was a prominent public official as Professor of Philosophy at Berlin University); whereas for Marx class struggle culminates in the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', the Marxist utopia, when the dialectic's mission is complete. In Adorno's reading, however, the dialectic was open-ended and had no final objective, a notion that proved to be very congenial to poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers who rejected teleologically oriented systems in general and Marxism in particular. Adorno is adamant throughout *Negative Dialectics* that everything that happens in the world cannot be reduced to a system, or can ever be made to fit into a preconceived system; the 'non–idealistic form', as he pointedly describes it, of dialectics has long 'since degenerated into a dogma' (Adorno 1973: 7). The book turns out to be, as its translator E. B. Ashton puts it, 'an apologia for deviationism' (Adorno 1973: xi) from an ostensibly Marxist thinker.

Without absolute identity, Adorno argued, there could be no teleology of the kind envisaged by both Hegel and Marx, and Adorno dismissed this possibility: 'The principle of absolute identity is self-contradictory. It perpetuates nonidentity in suppressed and damaged form' (Adorno 1973: 318). As far as postmodern thinkers are concerned there is no pattern to be found in history, never mind the inevitable trajectory towards the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'

posited by Marxism, and the future is to be considered wholly unpredictable. The critique of the notion of unity that is to be found in *Negative Dialectics* is to resound throughout postmodern thought.

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PAUL AUSTER (B. 1947)

Auster is one of the most characteristic of postmodern authors, with works like *The New York Trilogy*, his best-known book and the one that established his reputation, being constructed around typical postmodern concerns and obsessions, such as the nature of identity. He has gone on to explore that theme through a series of critically

praised novels that have established him as one of the most distinctive and imaginative voices in contemporary fiction.

The New York Trilogy plays elaborate games with identity over the course of the three novels, while maintaining a detective-story format designed to extend its appeal as much as possible in double-coding fashion. In the first volume, *City of Glass*, the lead character, Daniel Quinn, is an author who has adopted the pseudonym William Wilson as an author of detective stories featuring a private eye called Max Work. Quinn is a reclusive character who keeps his own identity completely secret, even from his publisher and agent, and appears to be a firm believer in the 'death of the author' (Barthes 1977: 148), remarking of his detective fiction that 'he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it' (Auster 1988: 4). After receiving several mysterious late-night phone calls, he decides to answer the phone and go along with what the caller wants, to see if he can work out why he is being bothered. The caller, it turns out, is trying to get in touch with the Paul Auster Detective Agency, and Quinn pretends to be Auster. Before he knows it he has met the caller and agreed to take on an assignment as a private eye, despite having no knowledge of what this involves except through writing about the exploits of his fictional detective figure Max Work. The sheer randomness of human existence, a theme to which Auster keeps returning, comes across strongly; circumstances are capable of pushing us in strange directions we might never have thought about.

The book becomes even more strange when Auster introduces himself into the narrative as a character. Quinn, in desperation when the case is not going well, looks up Auster's address in the phone book and pays him a visit, explaining that he is seeking out the Paul Auster Detective Agency. Auster is highly amused by this, but assures Quinn that he is a writer, not a detective, and that he cannot really help him out with what is going on. Auster puts in another appearance at the end of the story, when he meets the 'author'. It might sound over-intellectualised, but it does work on the detective-story level and the reader is drawn along by the plot in this regard. Quinn subsequently has a cameo role in the third part of the trilogy, *The Locked Room*, where he is referred to as a private detective, and hired to help one of the characters in the story, Sophie Fanshawe, find her husband, who has disappeared. The disappearance turns to be deliberate, as the narrator, a childhood friend of the husband, later receives a letter from him, emphasising that he does not want to return to his previous life or be tracked down in any way. Although Quinn has