

# The Routledge Companion to **Postmodernism**

Edited by Stuart Sim

THIRD EDITION

ROUTLEDGE



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Stuart Sim

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# **PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION**

## **THE MODERN, THE POSTMODERN AND THE POST-POSTMODERN**

It is a cliché by now to say that we live in a postmodern world, and indeed ‘post-modern’ has become one of the most used, and abused, words in the language. Yet it is striking that few people can say with any sense of assurance what that term ‘postmodern’ actually means or involves. Some theorists have suggested that it is as much a mood or attitude of mind as anything else, but they do seem to be agreed that it is widely in evidence – even if there is also a school of thought which claims that its moment has now passed. Such negative voices as Alan Kirby notwithstanding (‘postmodernism . . . is dead and buried’),<sup>1</sup> *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* is designed to outline what the phenomenon is, where to find it and why it is still culturally very significant.

In a general sense, postmodernism is to be regarded as a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the past couple of centuries. It has called into question our commitment to cultural ‘progress’ (that national economies must continue to grow, that the quality of life must keep improving indefinitely, etc.), as well as the political systems that have underpinned this belief. Postmodernists often refer to the ‘Enlightenment project’, meaning the liberal humanist ideology that has come to dominate Western culture since the eighteenth century: an ideology that has striven to bring about the emancipation of mankind from economic want and political oppression. In the view of postmodernists this project, laudable though it may have been at one time, has in its turn come to oppress humankind, and to force it into certain set ways of thought and action not always in its best interests. It is therefore to be resisted, and postmodernists are invariably critical of universalizing theories (‘grand narratives’ as the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard termed them),<sup>2</sup> as well as being anti-authoritarian in their outlook. To move from the modern to the postmodern is to embrace scepticism about what our culture stands for and strives for.

Since the first edition of this work was published in 1998, the cultural context in which postmodernism operates has changed quite dramatically. The events of 9/11 demonstrate that grand narratives can reinvent themselves, and the grand narrative of religious fundamentalism is now an acknowledged threat to global peace. One could argue that this is a phenomenon which undermines many of the claims of postmodernism, revealing these to be over-optimistic as to the extent of the cultural change that has occurred in recent times; equally, one



could see it as evidence of why we need postmodernism to combat this essentially regressive tendency. The remainder of this introduction will look at postmodernism in a wider historical context, including recent challenges to its ethos, to argue that what postmodernism represents is still valuable and that it is more than just a brief historical episode of late twentieth-century culture that has now exhausted its cultural role. The postmodern is still with us in the twenty-first century: a positive aspect of our culture that deserves our support. We set out, therefore, to define and defend the postmodern.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF A CONCEPT

The first recorded use of the word ‘postmodern’ is back in the 1870s, and although it proceeds to crop up periodically over the next few decades, sometimes with positive, sometimes with negative connotations, it is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that it comes to take on the precise meaning of a reaction against modernism and modernity. We can run through some of those usages briefly to see how the concept arrives at its current form.

In the 1870s the English painter John Watkins Chapman suggested that any art going beyond Impressionism, the revolutionary new art style of the period, would be definable as ‘postmodern painting’.<sup>3</sup> By 1917 ‘postmodern’ was the term chosen by the author Rudolf Pannwitz to describe the new form of militaristic and anti-humanist culture developing in a Europe ravaged by war.<sup>4</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s the term had more positive overtones in the work of the American theologian Bernard Iddings Bell, for whom a postmodernist was someone who had turned his back on the secular modern world and embraced religious faith instead.<sup>5</sup> Bell is certainly anti-modernist, but not in the sense of the postmodernists of our own day. The eminent historian Arnold Toynbee returned to the pessimistic application, when in *A Study of History* he spoke of the period from 1875 onwards as the ‘post-Modern Age of Western history’;<sup>6</sup> an age marked by cultural decline as evidenced in its two ‘world’ wars. A post-modern world was an altogether less secure and inviting place to live in than the modern one (1475–1875) it had replaced. Eventually, ‘postmodern’ begins to take on the meaning of ‘ultra-modern’, with the architectural theorist Joseph Hudnut deploying it in that fashion to describe the new prefabricated buildings being produced in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> Hudnut’s post-modern man was unsentimental, and looked to science to improve the quality of his life.

It has proved to be in the discipline of architecture that postmodernism has taken root most firmly as a conceptual term. The architectural theorist Charles Jencks has done more than anyone to popularize postmodernism as a theoretical concept, particularly in the series of editions of his best-known book *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (first edition, 1977). Jencks was highly critical of modern architecture, which he thought had lost touch with the general public. It was the so-called ‘International Style’, with its severe tower blocks

constructed of concrete and glass, all straight lines and lacking in ornamentation, with which Jencks particularly took issue. As the name indicated, this had come to dominate architectural practice worldwide, with nearly all large cities featuring at least some buildings in that style. Jencks famously claimed that when one of the most representative examples of the style, the award-winning Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St Louis, Missouri, was demolished in 1972, modern architecture died.<sup>8</sup> Pruitt-Igoe had proved a failure, declining into a vandalized shell of its former self in barely 20 years. For Jencks, that was a deeply symbolic history, the clear message being that the public had rejected the modernist creed encoded in a scheme like Pruitt-Igoe. Henceforth, architects were warned to come up with buildings in which the public would feel comfortable rather than alienated; in other words, buildings that could be described as 'double-coded':<sup>9</sup> able to appeal to both professional architects and the general public. The trend towards eclecticism in architecture, with old and new styles being freely mixed, was given its greatest boost by Jencks, and its products can now be found in most major cities (ironically enough, it has the makings of a new 'International Style' in this respect, if a less programmatic one than the previous).

Although architecture is arguably the area in which postmodernism first became a cause as such, the reaction to modernity and modernism has been widespread, expressing itself in a variety of ways. An ecology movement developed over the later twentieth century, concerned at the effect of technological progress on the environment. 'Green' political parties were formed in many Western European countries in consequence. Creative artists began to rebel against the strictures of the modernist style, which demanded, for example, abstraction in art and dissonant non-tonal composition in music. Many creative artists reverted to older styles that audiences felt more comfortable with, rather as Charles Jencks was calling on architects to do in their field. Philosophers and cultural theorists reacted against theories such as structuralism, which reduced the world to a series of interlinked systems with their own internal dynamic, or 'deep structure'. The workings of the entire world could, it was thought, be mapped out in terms of these deep structures, which dictated how all systems operated. One unfortunate consequence of the theory was that it seemed to deny the existence of free will; as Roland Barthes famously remarked of language, it spoke through human beings, suggesting that we were no more than channels for the actions of mysterious external forces.<sup>10</sup> Structuralism's dominance in mid-century intellectual enquiry (particularly in France) led to a reaction, collectively called poststructuralism, which increasingly came to challenge the assumptions on which structuralist analysis rested. Whereas structuralists emphasized similarity and inter-connectedness, poststructuralists emphasized difference and open-endedness. Structuralism was a universalizing theory, whereas poststructuralists spent their time demonstrating how such theories must always fail: the battle lines were drawn.

For our purposes here, postmodernism will be taken to encompass figures and debates within poststructuralism as well. Poststructuralism is a term that

refers to a wide range of responses to the structuralist paradigm – responses such as the philosophically orientated ‘deconstruction’ of Jacques Derrida, the various ‘archaeological’ and ‘genealogical’ enquiries into cultural history of Michel Foucault, and the ‘difference feminism’ of such theorists as Luce Irigaray.<sup>11</sup> Poststructuralism has been an influential part of the cultural scene since the 1960s, but nowadays it can be seen to be part of a more general reaction to authoritarian ideologies and political systems that we define as postmodernism. We might say that postmodernism subsumes poststructuralism, and we shall proceed on that basis in this volume.

## FROM POSTMODERNISM TO REACTION

Postmodernism is therefore a principled reaction to modernism and modernity, and what are regarded as their social and political failings, but since this book was first published it has become apparent that there can be large-scale reactions in turn against the postmodern ethos. Religious fundamentalism is only the most obvious example of a grand narrative reasserting itself in the face of what it considers to be unacceptable cultural trends, this time the drift towards moral relativism. A host of other grand narratives can also be instanced as in a process of reassertion: market fundamentalism, eco-fundamentalism, various kinds of political and nationalistic fundamentalism, to name the most prominent. I talk about these and others in my book *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma*,<sup>12</sup> but it is worth running through some of them briefly here to discover what they can tell us about the current state of postmodernism as a cultural movement.

Postmodern theorists like to claim that we have crossed a watershed into a new world order where institutional authority no longer commands automatic respect, but it is clear that not just modernity but pre-modernity is fighting back and that grand narratives can still speak meaningfully to large sections of the world’s population. Islamic fundamentalism is a very significant global force, seemingly able to claim the support, whether tacit or overt, of a majority of Muslim communities in its struggle against Western cultural imperialism. Several Islamic states, or in some cases provinces of these states, have reverted in recent years to shariah law, where the Q’ran is used as the foundation for the legal and political systems. Adherence to shariah law turns nation-states into theocracies, in which religious doctrine controls all aspects of human existence. Grand narrative in such cases is embraced with an enthusiasm which the post-modernist will find deeply disturbing. Institutional authority is once again accepted unquestioningly, obeyed blindly and allowed to direct the individual’s life in the name of a larger cause. Faith, rather than reason or scepticism, becomes the basis of the cultural process. In its more extreme form – as with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan – Islamic fundamentalism is effectively a return to a pre-modern society, where almost all the modern world is rejected (with the significant exception of its weaponry).

## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

Christian fundamentalism has been no less active of late, as witness the infiltration of the Republican Party in America by the Christian Right. Activists have led campaigns at local, state and national level to curb liberalizing legislation in areas such as sexual behaviour and abortion. Any move towards cultural relativism is bitterly opposed: conformity not difference is the ideal sought instead. Christian fundamentalism also has interesting, and more than somewhat bizarre, links with Zionist fundamentalism, since its theories of the Millennium demand a strong Jewish presence in the Holy Land (as was), in order for their conversion to be achieved – the conversion of the Jews being one of the critical signs of the imminence of the Second Coming. Zionist fundamentalists are happy to go along with this notion, as it fits in with their own desire to recreate Israel as it was in biblical times, the land of God's 'chosen people' (Palestinians excluded, of course). The close political links between America and Israel owe at least something to the successful lobbying by the Christian Right among high-ranking Republican politicians. The grand narrative of the Bible is held to provide all the information we need for the unfolding of human history. Cultural relativism is nowhere to be found on the agenda.

In the economic realm market fundamentalism is the current paradigm, and to its adherents it is a matter of blind faith, too. The term 'market fundamentalism' was coined by the international financier George Soros to describe the unrestricted, unregulated *laissez-faire* capitalism favoured by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.<sup>13</sup> These institutions tend to impose this model on failing economies around the globe, sometimes, as in the case of Argentina, with quite disastrous results. Market fundamentalism demands the dismantling of the state sector (encouraging privatization programmes for all state-owned industries), low interest rates and an open market for capital. When Argentina followed such prescriptions in the 1990s, as directed, it led to the collapse of the currency and banking system; but to the IMF and the World Bank the needs of the market came first. Once more, faith was to be placed in the grand narrative at the expense of its impact on individuals. The market was to be regarded as an authority which could not be called into question. Even the recent credit crisis has not dented the faith placed by such institutions, and most Western governments, in the principles of the free market.

Political and nationalistic fundamentalism put their trust in grand narratives, of the political system or national identity, that assume an aura of total authority. For thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, Western liberal democracy is the only acceptable political system: the system that has unequivocally established its superiority over all others. We have reached the 'end of history', and it will only be a matter of time before everyone conforms to the Western model.<sup>14</sup> Even more insidiously, the Western states at the forefront of this cultural trend often espouse a nationalism which seeks to keep the relevant national identity as pure as possible and immigration from other poorer parts of the world at a minimum. Dissenting views are not tolerated, and indeed intolerance is a general feature of grand narratives. Postmodernism, with its commitment to

dissent, pluralism, cultural difference and scepticism towards authority, finds itself in direct conflict with such systems, which substitute the authoritarian collective will for the individual. When eco-fundamentalists blow up ski resorts because of the threat they pose to local wildlife, or when pro-life advocates bomb abortion clinics, they do so in the name of grand narratives which are taken to represent universal truths overriding all opposition. In today's world, postmodernism confronts an array of such narratives, modern and pre-modern, that reject any challenge to their authority. The postmodern commitments just mentioned have a definite political edge.

## **DEFINING AND DEFENDING THE POSTMODERN**

Postmodernism remains a notoriously diffuse cultural movement, but it does mean something – and does stand for something. This volume will show what that meaning is, in all its breadth and variety, and why so many thinkers and creative artists consider it to be worth defending. If the cultural context has altered in the past 13 years, the need to argue the case for the postmodern has not.

## **STRUCTURE AND SCOPE OF THE VOLUME**

*The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* is divided into two parts: (I) Essays, and (II) Dictionary entries. Part I consists of 19 extended essays tracing both the sources and the impact of postmodern thought, and includes such topics as 'Postmodernism and philosophy', 'Postmodernism and politics', 'Postmodernism and feminism' and 'Postmodernism and science and technology', as well as a series of essays dealing with postmodernism and the arts and media (architecture, literature, film, television, performance art and music, for example). The concluding essay, 'Postmodernism, modernity and the tradition of dissent', draws together the various strands of criticism of postmodernism, in order to demonstrate just how controversial the movement has turned out to be, and how much opposition it has managed to arouse even in such a relatively short time. Collectively these essays establish the breadth of postmodern thought that has transformed the cultural landscape of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In Part II, the reader will find short dictionary-style entries, providing incisive definitions of key terms and critical concepts associated with postmodern thought. The object of the book overall is to provide accessible material on what can appear to be a forbiddingly complex and disparate area of discourse: a guide to 'who's who' and 'what's what' in postmodernism. It is a feature of this new edition that, as well as having been extensively revised, it includes much new material – namely, four extra essays (on 'Critical theory', 'Gender and sexuality', 'Organizations' and 'Performance' respectively), and a clutch of new dictionary entries on such topical subjects as 'Dark matter', 'M-theory' and 'Global warming'.

## HOW TO USE THIS VOLUME

To facilitate cross-reference, all the entries in Part II are picked out in bold when they appear elsewhere in the volume (for the first time in the particular context), and an index is also provided to enable readers to follow up the various appearances of specific figures and terms over the course of the Preface and essays in Part I. The two sections of the *Companion* are designed to interact, allowing more or less detailed information to be accessed, depending on the reader's requirements. You may merely want to refresh your memory as to the definition of a particular term, or go into more depth in, say, philosophy or popular culture. Alternatively, you may simply wish to range around the various networks of information the book offers, in order to build up your own particular picture of what postmodernism involves; 'Companions' provide just that creative possibility for each individual reader, and the choice is yours in this new, significantly expanded and revised edition.

## CONTRIBUTORS

The contributors to this volume are drawn from a wide range of disciplines and are acknowledged experts in their particular areas. Their collective aim has been to map the postmodern such that its richness, diversity and cultural significance can be appreciated to the full by the general reader. Initials are given to identify A–Z entry writers in Part II. The contributors are, in alphabetical order:

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## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

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## NOTES

- 1 Alan Kirby, 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', *Philosophy Now*, 58 (November/December, 2006), pp. 34–7 (p. 34).
- 2 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979], trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
- 3 See Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries* (New York: Printed Editions, 1978), p. 7.
- 4 See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), pp. 5–6.
- 5 See Bernard Iddings Bell, *Postmodernism and Other Essays* (Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse, 1926).
- 6 Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. IX (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 235.
- 7 Joseph Hudnut, *Architecture and the Spirit of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).
- 8 See Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 6th edn (London: Academy Editions, 1991), p. 24.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 10 See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977).
- 11 See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* [1961], trans. Richard Howard (London: Tavistock, 1967); Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* [1985], trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- 12 Stuart Sim, *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma* (Cambridge: Icon Press, 2004).
- 13 See, for example, George Soros, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Open Society Endangered* (New York: BBS/Public Affairs, 1998).
- 14 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

**Part I**  
**POSTMODERNISM:**  
**ITS HISTORY AND**  
**CULTURAL CONTEXT**



# 1

## POSTMODERNISM AND PHILOSOPHY

STUART SIM

Philosophy, particularly the recent French philosophical tradition, has been both a prime site for debate about **postmodernism** and a source of many of the theories of what constitutes postmodernism. Probably the leading figure to be cited is Jean-François Lyotard, whose book *The Postmodern Condition* is widely considered to be the most powerful theoretical expression of postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> Lyotard's plea that we should reject the '**grand narratives**' (that is, universal theories) of Western culture because they have now lost all their credibility, sums up the ethos of postmodernism, with its disdain for authority in all its many guises. There is no longer any point in engaging with, for example, Marxism, the argument goes; rather, we should ignore it as an irrelevance to our lives. Postmodern philosophy provides us with the arguments and techniques to make that gesture of dissent, as well as the means to make value judgements in the absence of such overall authorities.

One of the best ways of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement would be as a form of scepticism – scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms and so on – and that places it in a long-running tradition in Western thought that stretches back to classical Greek philosophy. Scepticism is a primarily negative form of philosophy, which sets out to undermine other philosophical theories claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth, or of criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth. The technical term to describe such a style of philosophy is '**anti-foundational**'. Anti-foundationalists dispute the validity of the foundations of **discourse**, asking such questions as 'What guarantees the truth of your foundation (that is, starting point)?' Postmodernism has drawn heavily on the example set by anti-foundationalist philosophers, perhaps most notably the iconoclastic nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose call for a 'revaluation of all values' constitutes something of a battle-cry for the movement.<sup>2</sup>

Before considering postmodernism's sceptical credentials in greater detail, however, it would be helpful to say what, and who, can be regarded as falling under the heading of postmodern philosophy. It will be understood here to mean not just the inclusion of commentators on postmodernism itself like Lyotard, but also the various discourses, such as **deconstruction**, that go under the name of **poststructuralism**. Poststructuralism's rejection of the **structuralist** tradition of thought is yet another gesture of scepticism towards received authority, and can be treated as part of the postmodern intellectual landscape.

Although postmodern philosophy is a somewhat disparate area, we can note certain recurrent features, such as that gesture of scepticism, an anti-foundational bias, and an almost reflex dislike of authority, that make it reasonable to discuss it as a recognizable style of philosophy in its own right.

Poststructuralism is a broad cultural movement spanning various intellectual disciplines that has involved a rejection not just of structuralism and its methods, but also the ideological assumptions that lie behind them. It is to be regarded as both a philosophical and a political movement therefore, as is postmodernism in general. Poststructuralism called into question the cultural certainties that structuralism had been felt to embody: certainties such as the belief that the world was intrinsically knowable, and that structuralism gave us a methodological key to unlock the various systems that made up that world. Structuralism takes its cue from the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who revolutionized the study of linguistics in his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*.<sup>3</sup> Saussure's major point about language was that it was above all a system: a system with rules and regulations (or internal grammar) that governed how the various elements of language interacted. Language was made up of **signs**, and signs consisted of two parts, a signifier (word) and a signified (concept), which combined, in an act of mental understanding, to form the sign. Although there was no necessary connection between a word and the object it named (they were 'arbitrary', as Saussure admitted), the force of convention ensured that they did not change at anyone's whim. There was at the very least a *relative* stability to language and the production of meaning, and language was to be viewed as a system of signs which induced a predictable response on the part of the linguistic community.

The linguistic model set up by Saussure formed the basis of structuralist analysis, which applied it to systems in general, making the assumption that every system had an internal grammar that governed its operations. The point of structuralist analysis was to uncover that grammar, whether the system in question was tribal myth, the advertising industry or the world of literature or fashion. Ultimately, what poststructuralists object to is the overall tidiness of the structuralist enterprise, where there are no loose ends and everything falls neatly into place. Thus for a thinker like Claude Lévi-Strauss, or the early Roland Barthes, every detail of a **narrative** was significant in terms of the structure of the final product (there being no random elements), and narratives fell into specific genres, of which particular instances – say, a given tribal myth – were merely variations on a central theme.<sup>4</sup> From such a perspective one system (or narrative) comes to seem much like any other, and the analysis of its grammar turns into a fairly predictable exercise, almost as if one knew beforehand what one was going to find. One could even argue, and poststructuralists did, that the analytical techniques being used by the structuralist *determined* the results. What structuralism seems to allow little scope for is chance, creativity or the unexpected. For a poststructuralist these are much more important than all the similarities between systems, and there is what amounts to a commitment to

locating, and dwelling on, dissimilarity, difference and the unpredictability of analysis among poststructuralist thinkers.

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction became one of the most powerful expressions of the poststructuralist ethos. Deconstruction was directed against the system-building side of structuralism, and took issue with the idea that all phenomena were reducible to the workings of systems, with its implication that we could come to have total control over our environment. Derrida was concerned to demonstrate the instability of language, and indeed of systems in general. Signs were not such predictable entities in his view, and there was never any perfect conjunction of signifier and signified to guarantee unproblematical communication. Some 'slippage' of meaning always occurred. For one thing, words always contained echoes and traces of other words, with their sound quality, for example, invariably putting one in mind of a range of similar-sounding words. Derrida provided evidence of this slippage in action by means of a concept called '**différance**', a neologism derived from the French word *différence* (meaning both difference and deferral).<sup>5</sup> One could not detect which of the two words was intended in speech (they are pronounced the same), only in writing. To Derrida, what was revealed at this point was the inherent indeterminacy of meaning.

Linguistic meaning was an unstable phenomenon: at all times, and all places, *différance* applied. (It is worth noting that Derrida denies that *différance* is a concept; for him it is merely the identification of a process embedded within language itself.) The fondness for pun and word-play within deconstructive writing – a recurrent feature of all its major practitioners – has as its goal the illustration of language's instability, as well as its endlessly creative capacity to generate new and unexpected meanings. Meaning is therefore a fleeting phenomenon that evaporates almost as soon as it occurs in spoken or written language (or keeps transforming itself into new meanings), rather than something fixed that holds over time for a series of different audiences. Derrida contends that all Western philosophy is based on the premise that the full meaning of a word is 'present' in the speaker's mind, such that it can be transmitted, without any significant slippage, to the listener. This belief is what he calls the '**metaphysics of presence**', and for Derrida it is an illusion:<sup>6</sup> *différance* always intrudes into communication to prevent the establishment of 'presence', or completeness, of meaning. The emphasis on difference, and on what fails to conform to the norm or to system-building, that we find in deconstruction is very characteristic of the postmodern philosophical ethos.

Michel Foucault is another thinker who turned against the system-building and difference-excluding tendencies of structuralist thought. Once again, it is the fact of difference that is emphasized. In Foucault's case, there is a particular interest in marginalized groups whose difference keeps them excluded from political **power**; groups such as the mentally ill, prisoners and homosexuals. Post-Renaissance culture has been committed to the marginalization, even demonization, of difference, by setting strict norms of behaviour. Foucault has

written a series of case studies describing how these norms were implemented in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe, such that a whole new range of regimented institutions – insane asylums, prisons, hospitals – came into being in order to deal with the ‘different’.<sup>7</sup> For Foucault these institutions are expressions of political power, and of the way that a dominant faction in society can impose its will on others.

To demonstrate how sexual difference had been demonized in **modern** society, Foucault turned back to classical times in his three-volume study *The History of Sexuality* (1976–84) to investigate how homosexuality functioned in Greek and Roman culture.<sup>8</sup> Greek society was more tolerant of sexual difference than our own, although no less moral in its outlook. In Foucault’s parlance, it had a different discourse of sexuality in which no one practice was privileged over others, but homosexuality and heterosexuality flourished side by side. Foucault contrasted this unfavourably to modern times, when heterosexuality was turned into a norm from which all other forms of sexual expression were treated as deviations. This insistence on the norm at the expense of the different is all part of the authoritarianism that thinkers like Foucault associate with modern culture.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) represented yet another poststructuralist attack on authoritarianism; in this case the authoritarianism embedded within psychoanalytic theory, which, through the mechanism of theories like the **Oedipus** complex, seeks to control the free expression of human desire. For Deleuze and Guattari individuals are ‘**desiring-machines**’, who lack the sense of unity we generally associate with individual identity, but who find the opportunity to realize their desire being curbed by the socio-political authorities (with fascism as the most potent example of how the process works).<sup>9</sup> Psychoanalysis becomes for Deleuze and Guattari a symbol of how desire is suppressed, and in opposition to it they posit ‘**schizoanalysis**’, based on the experience of the schizophrenic – who in their scheme becomes some kind of ideal model of human behaviour.<sup>10</sup> The political dimension to poststructuralist thought, often somewhat hidden under cloudy metaphysical discussions in deconstruction, is unmistakably foregrounded here.

**Difference feminism** can also be included under the heading of poststructuralism, in that it queries the supposed rigidity of gender categories. The argument is that gender identity, particularly female, is not fixed, but is instead a fluid process that cannot be reduced to any essence or norm of behaviour (in this instance a patriarchally derived norm of behaviour). Theorists such as Luce Irigaray have used this form of argument to challenge the assumptions of patriarchy, in particular the assumption of specifically male and female gender traits that lead to gender stereotypes that our society still largely adheres to, and uses as a basis for the suppression of women.<sup>11</sup>

The most influential voice of postmodern philosophy is Jean-François Lyotard, and there is a consistent thread of anti-authoritarianism running through his philosophical writings that we can now recognize as quintessentially

postmodern. In his early career Lyotard can be described as a Marxist. He was a member of the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Socialism or Barbarism), who were dedicated to subjecting Marxist theory to a searching critique from the inside, and he acted as the spokesperson on Algeria for the group's journal. Lyotard's writings on the Algerian war of liberation in the 1950s and 1960s reveal someone who is far from being an orthodox Marxist, and more than willing to call Marxist principles into question.<sup>12</sup> The major objection he registers is that Algeria was being treated by the Communist Party hierarchy as a classic case of proletarian revolution, when in reality it was a peasant society where Marxist categories had little practical value.

After the break-up of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in the 1960s Lyotard self-consciously distanced himself from his Marxist past. Like many French intellectuals of his generation he was disenchanted by the pro-establishment position adopted by the French Communist Party in the 1968 Paris *événements*, and in works such as *Libidinal Economy* he vented the frustration he felt by then towards official Marxism.<sup>13</sup> *Libidinal Economy* claimed that Marxism was unable to encompass the various libidinal drives that all individuals experienced, since these drives lay beyond any theory's control (the argument is similar to the one expressed in *Anti-Oedipus*). What was precisely wrong with Marxism was that it tried to suppress these energies, and in so doing revealed its latent authoritarianism. Behind the book's vicious attack on Marxism lay a belief on Lyotard's part that neither human nature nor historical process was as predictable, and therefore controllable, as Marxist theory was insisting. Lyotard asked us to accept that libidinal energy (something like the complex of subconscious drives identified by Freud) demolished any claim that Marxism may have had to be able to direct events. The book can be seen as the beginning of the critique of 'grand narrative' that was to lie at the heart of Lyotard's most successful and influential work, *The Postmodern Condition*.

*The Postmodern Condition* argues that knowledge is now the world's most significant commodity, and that it may well become a source of conflict between nations. Whoever controls knowledge, Lyotard insists, now exerts political control, and he is keen to ensure that the dissemination of knowledge is kept as open as possible. His alternative to the centralized political control of knowledge is to make all data banks accessible to the general public. Knowledge is seen to be communicated by means of narrative, and Lyotard is critical of what he calls grand narratives: theories that claim to be able to explain everything, and to resist any attempt to change their form (or 'narrative'). Marxism, for example, has its own particular narrative of world history which it feels is true and thus beyond any criticism or need of revision. It is not a narrative to be reinterpreted constantly in the light of changing cultural events, but an impregnable theory that holds over time and whose authority is not to be doubted. To Lyotard, such an attitude is authoritarian, and he celebrates 'little narrative' (*petit récit*) in its stead.<sup>14</sup> Little narratives are put together on a tactical basis by small groups of individuals to achieve some particular objective (such as the

'little narrative' combination of students and workers in the 1968 *événements*, calling for government reforms), and do not pretend to have the answers to all society's problems: ideally, they should last only as long as is necessary to achieve their specific short-term goals. Lyotard considers that little narratives are the most inventive way of disseminating, and creating, knowledge, and that they help to break down the monopoly traditionally exercised by grand narratives. In science, for example, they are now to be regarded as the primary means of enquiry. '**Postmodern science**', Lyotard informs us, is a search for paradoxes, instabilities and the unknown, rather than an attempt to construct yet another grand narrative that would apply over the entire scientific community.

Lyotard's objective is to demolish the authority wielded by grand narrative, which he takes to be repressive of individual creativity. 'We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives', he declares;<sup>15</sup> that is, we can no longer rely on them to guide our action, either at the public or private level. If we stop believing in grand narratives then it is to be assumed that they will simply wither away. Although this is a somewhat idealistic view of the political process, something like this withering away did occur a few years after the publication of *The Postmodern Condition*, when Eastern European communism collapsed – largely without violent clashes with the political authorities. In postmodern terms of reference, the populace stopped believing in the prevailing ideology, which then ceased to have any authority to enforce its will.

One of the problems we are left with when we dispense with grand narratives, or central authorities of any kind, is how to construct value judgements that others will accept as just and reasonable. Lyotard confronts this problem in *Just Gaming* when he argues that it is still possible to make value judgements, even if we have no grand narrative to back us up, on a 'case-by-case' basis (a form of pragmatism he adapts from Aristotle's political and ethical writings).<sup>16</sup> Operating in a case-by-case manner, where one is admitting the absence of any absolute criteria, is the condition Lyotard refers to as '**paganism**', and it becomes an ideal of how we ought to proceed in a postmodern world. There never will be such absolute criteria, or foundations of belief, to guide us; but that need not, Lyotard claims, entail a collapse into social disorder, as critics from the grand narrative side are wont to suggest. Lyotard is espousing anti-foundationalism: a rejection of the idea that there are foundations to our systems of thought, or belief, that lie beyond question, and that are necessary to the business of making value judgements. Postmodernist philosophy has proved to be resolutely anti-foundational in outlook, and unwilling to accept that this renders it dysfunctional as philosophy.

Lyotard's later philosophy is very much concerned with what he calls the '**event**', the concept of the '**differend**' and the **sublime**. The event is for Lyotard an occurrence that dramatically alters the way we view the world, and casts all our ideological assumptions into doubt in the process. Auschwitz is one such event, the *événements* another. The former in particular cannot be explained away by the application of grand narrative theory; in fact, it represents the point at which

grand narrative theorizing breaks down. As for the latter, it is an explosion of libidinal energy the system cannot deal with either. To acknowledge that there are events which cannot be forecast or encompassed within any neat universal theory is to acknowledge not just the limitations of grand narrative but also the openness of the future. This openness becomes an article of faith to postmodernists: the future must not be considered as determined in advance such that all human effort is rendered meaningless.

Differends are conflicts of interest between parties which cannot be resolved, but must be acknowledged and kept in view at all times. Each party inhabits what Lyotard calls a different 'phrase regimen' (a development of the notion of 'language game') whose objectives are **incommensurable** with the other, and neither of which has any ethical right to make the other conform to its wishes.<sup>17</sup> What tends to happen in practice, particularly political practice, is that one party to the dispute enforces its view on the other, 'resolving' the dispute to its own advantage. In Lyotard's terms of reference, one phrase regimen exerts dominance over another – a classic instance of authoritarianism in action. As an example of this in the everyday world, Lyotard cites the case of an exploited employee who cannot gain any redress for her exploitation if she brings an action against her employer, since the court that hears her plea is set up on the principle that such exploitation is legal. The employer's phrase regimen is excluding hers from having a proper voice. It is the business of philosophers to help such suppressed phrase regimens find their voice, this being what Lyotard describes as a 'philosophical politics'.<sup>18</sup> Philosophical politics – the search for new, counter-cultural phrase regimens – can be considered the highest expression of postmodern philosophy.

Lyotard develops an obsession with the sublime, which comes to represent for him the fatal flaw in any totalizing philosophy. Immanuel Kant had wrestled with the notion of the sublime in his so-called 'Third Critique', since it appeared to create a gap in his theory of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> This theory required our concepts and our sense experience of the world to conform to each other. When we turned to the sublime, however, we were confronted with something infinite and absolute; that is, with the inconceivable, and thus a challenge to our claims to knowledge. While Kant was dismayed by this finding, Lyotard appropriated it for the cause of the postmodern as proof that no philosophical theory could provide a total picture of existence. The sublime always lay beyond our powers to represent or explain, and in consequence acquired immense symbolic importance for postmodern thought. All attempts to construct a grand narrative would be undermined by the fact of the sublime.

Towards the end of his career Lyotard is very much concerned with the way the forces of 'techno-science' (for which we can read the multinationals) are attempting to hijack the course of human history, by preparing for the end of life on Earth. Lyotard argues that techno-scientists are gradually eradicating humankind from the picture, by developing increasingly sophisticated computer technology with the ability to reproduce itself and to continue existing some-

where else in the universe when the Sun burns out (an event due in some 4.5 billion years or so). Techno-science's ultimate goal, Lyotard warns us in *The Inhuman*, is to make thought possible without a body, and this represents a threat to humanity and its values that should be strongly resisted, being 'inhuman' in spirit.<sup>20</sup> What techno-science wants is to reduce humanity to its assumed essence, that is, thought, and then to render this compliant in computer program form. Given thought without a body there are no longer events or differends to worry about of course, nor the openness of the future that post-modernists so prize. It is another case of excluding the different and the unpredictable in order to exert control. Conspicuously left out of the equation is the individual as well as the little narrative, neither of which has any place in the authoritarian scheme of things – and to wish to dehumanize humankind by reducing it to thought-process alone is an ultimate act of authoritarianism to Lyotard. Resistance at little narrative level becomes an ethical act on behalf of the cause of difference; and it is difference that must be protected at all costs in the postmodern world.

Jean Baudrillard's work is another important strand of postmodern philosophy. He too came to be very critical of Marxism and structuralism, eventually rejecting the notion that there were hidden structures behind all phenomena which it was the analyst's task to identify and explain. Baudrillard contended instead that the postmodern world was a world of **simulacra**, where we could no longer differentiate between reality and **simulation**.<sup>21</sup> Simulacra represented nothing but themselves: there was no other reality to which they referred. In consequence, Baudrillard could claim that Disneyland and television now constituted America's reality, and, even more provocatively, that the Gulf War of 1991 did not happen, but was merely a simulation (along the lines of a video game, it would seem). Not surprisingly, this latter view attracted a great deal of criticism for its apparent cynicism and lack of sensitivity to the human dimension involved.

Another argument of Baudrillard's that has inspired considerable controversy is that systems no longer need to be opposed, and that they can instead be 'seduced' – by which he means beguiled into submission.<sup>22</sup> Feminists have been extremely critical of what to them is the implicit sexism of the notion of seduction, and have accused Baudrillard of reinforcing sexual stereotypes by its use. While acknowledging the force of the feminist rejoinder, one might also regard seduction as yet another characteristically postmodern attempt to undermine systems by locating their weak spots. Postmodern philosophy in general sees no need for outright confrontation with systems of power, being more concerned to demonstrate how such systems (Marxism and communism being outstanding examples) can be made to implode.

The reaction against doctrinaire Marxism in the work of thinkers like Lyotard and Baudrillard is part of yet another cultural trend that is now known as **post-Marxism**. Post-Marxism has become an important theoretical position, and includes not just figures who wish to reject their Marxist beliefs, but also



those who want to revise Marxism in terms of new theoretical and cultural developments. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe gave voice to the latter constituency when they published their controversial book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985.<sup>23</sup> In this study they argued that Marxism ought to be aligning itself with the various new social movements that had been springing up (feminism, the **Greens**, ethnic and sexual minorities, for example); in other words, for Marxism to embrace political **pluralism** and drop its pretensions to be a body of received truth. Marxism also needed to take account of the various new theories that had been coming into prominence – theories such as deconstruction or postmodernism. Once again we can observe the characteristic postmodern distrust of grand narratives and their dogmatism coming to the fore. What is felt to be wrong with Marxism is that it has failed to move with the times, and to realize how pluralist society has become. Marxism is instead stuck at the level of trying to impose its theories on others, on the grounds that it alone possesses the truth. Viewed from this perspective Marxism is an authoritarian theory. Laclau and Mouffe, on the other hand, are putting the case for a more ‘open’ Marxism, able to adapt to changing cultural circumstances – and to attract new audiences in the process. Predictably enough, the Marxist establishment has been dismissive of Laclau and Mouffe’s claims that Marxism requires drastic revision, or that it should aspire towards pluralism, holding on instead to Marxism’s supposed truth and universality of application.

Another interesting line of post-Marxist thought can be found in the work of Slavoj Žižek, who put forward an interesting explanation of why grand theories like Marxism could exercise the hold they did, even when, as in the case of the Soviet Empire in its latter stages, it was plain that the theory was not delivering on its promises. Žižek’s argument was that those living under such a regime convinced themselves to believe in the theory’s claims in some sense, even when, in the back of their mind, they knew these to be false. This was a condition he called ‘enlightened false consciousness’, and it was to be seen as a coping strategy.<sup>24</sup> To admit that the theory was completely wrong would be psychologically devastating, as one had no apparent way of escaping its controlling **power** in everyday life: ‘they know that ... they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it’.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, however, trust in the illusion faltered.

It is this distrust of grand theory, and its authoritarian bias, that can be considered the distinguishing feature of postmodern philosophy, which maintains a libertarian attitude throughout its various expressions. In the Anglo-American philosophical world, we can find such views being espoused by the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, a well-known champion of the recent **continental philosophical** tradition. Rorty also had no time for grand theory, and, in prototypically pragmatist fashion, was less concerned with whether theories were true or false than whether they were useful and interesting.<sup>26</sup> Philosophy, for Rorty, is no more than a form of conversation, and his own preference when it comes to identifying a source of ideas to guide our behaviour is for other subjects such as literature. Rorty’s turn to ‘**post-**

**philosophy**', as it has been called, is characteristically postmodern in its rejection of the standard narrative associated with the Western philosophical tradition. Yet another authority is unceremoniously consigned to the historical dustbin.

Not everyone has been happy with postmodernism's frequent recourse to the historical dustbin. The American critic Fredric Jameson, for example, has dubbed postmodern theory 'the cultural logic of late capitalism', regarding it as being, unwittingly or otherwise, in collusion with the powers-that-be in helping to maintain the political status quo.<sup>27</sup> Postmodernists have consistently criticized the left's belief in the efficacy of ideological confrontation, and for a Marxist like Jameson that has the effect of serving the cause of the right, which has a vested interest in promoting apathy about the political process. Jürgen Habermas is another to find postmodernism ideologically suspect, defending modernity as being more in the public interest.<sup>28</sup> (For more on postmodernism's critics, see Chapter 19.)

Overall, postmodern philosophy is to be defined as an updated version of scepticism, more concerned with destabilizing other theories and their pretensions to truth than with setting up a positive theory of its own; although of course to be sceptical of the theoretical claims of others is to have a programme of one's own, if only by default. Postmodern philosophy, therefore, is a deployment of philosophy to undermine the authoritarian imperatives in our culture, at both the theoretical and the political level. Yet to some extent postmodernism has become its own grand narrative (there is a definite postmodernist line to most philosophical issues), and therefore vulnerable to attack in its turn. It is also possible to argue that postmodern philosophers have overstated the decline of grand narratives, and one highly pertinent objection to Lyotard's dismissal of their continuing significance has been that **religious fundamentalism** (a grand narrative if ever there was one) has manifestly been on the increase in recent decades. The growth of Islamic fundamentalism in particular seems to challenge the validity of Lyotard's judgement on this score, given that it is now a major factor in the political life of an increasing number of countries in the Middle East and Asia, making it a critical influence on the global political scene. Post-9/11 we must assume that postmodernism is in open conflict with fundamentalist trends in our world (we can include **market fundamentalism** in the equation as well).

Lyotard himself takes a cyclical view of cultural history, in which postmodernism and modernism succeed each other over time in unending sequence. Thus there have been postmodernisms in the past (figures like François Rabelais or Laurence Sterne qualifying as postmoderns for Lyotard), and there will be both modernisms and postmodernisms again in the future. It is just possible to argue that we are already into a **post-postmodernist** world, in which different cultural preoccupations – such as the reconstruction of grand narratives – are making their presence felt. Scepticism has gone in and out of fashion over the course of philosophical history, and it may well be that the current round has served its usual purpose in drawing attention to the weaknesses of certain

philosophical positions and that a less negatively orientated philosophical programme can take its place for the immediate future. Already calls are being made in the realm of aesthetic theory to move past postmodernism with the hybrid of modernism and **postcolonialism** known as ‘**altermodernism**’, which aims to transcend the restrictive world of ‘isms’ altogether and in the process create a new, more dynamic relationship between artists and their audience.<sup>29</sup> So be on the lookout for any similar ‘post-postmodernist’ initiatives: but be vigilant, also, for any drift back into intellectual authoritarianism.

## NOTES

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- 5 See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* [1972], trans. Alan Bass (Harvester: Brighton, 1982), p. 3.
- 6 See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* [1967], trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278–93.
- 7 See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* [1961], trans. Richard Howard (London: Tavistock, 1967).
- 8 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vols I–III. Vol. I: *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); vol. II: *The Use of Pleasure* [1984], trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987); vol. III: *The Care of the Self* [1984], trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).
- 9 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* [1972], trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (London: Athlone Press, 1984), p. 2.
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- 15 *Ibid.*
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- 18 Ibid., p. xiii.
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- 21 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
- 22 See particularly Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* [1979], trans. Brian Singer (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).
- 23 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
- 24 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 29.
- 25 Ibid., p. 33.
- 26 See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).
- 27 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
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## 2

# POSTMODERNISM AND CRITICAL THEORY

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**Postmodernism** is most readily defined as the set of responses – cultural, political, intellectual – to the perceived failures of **modernism** both as a vanguard aesthetic movement and as a general ideology of human progress forged in the fires and bellows of the industrial age. Given the sheer diversity of modernism itself, though, the various postmodernist responses to it from the mid-1970s to early 1990s are themselves variable, even paradoxical and contradictory. The corresponding term, ‘**postmodernity**’, applies to the socio-historical situation in which the discourses and practices of **modernity**, based in the ideals of the **Enlightenment**, are understood to have been superseded. And while this reputedly new epoch is best realized in a post-industrial America that also happens to be the primary locus for the cultural trends and intellectual debates associated with postmodernism, the theoretical inspirations for its analysis as *simultaneously* an aesthetic *and* a historical break – that is, as a fundamental change in social reality – are principally drawn from the writings of a number of French thinkers whose works are commonly grasped under the rubric **poststructuralism**, and more generally, that of critical theory. If the term poststructuralism, evokes the names of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard (the philosophers most identified with the name and concept of the postmodern), as well as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the broader term, critical theory, harkens back to an even earlier moment, that of the Frankfurt School for Social Research and the likes of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse. Interestingly, both of these intellectual movements evolved primarily *in reaction to* the perceived failures of preceding schools of thought. In the case of the Frankfurt School, critical theory thought to expand beyond the narrow economic determinism of traditional Marxism by uncovering and analysing the entire world of lived experience and culture, including aesthetics, which had previously been treated as a mere superstructural reflection of the economic infrastructure of modes and relations of production. In the case of poststructuralism, as the very name declares, the reaction was to the reputedly universalizing and scientific tendencies of classic **structuralism**. Where structuralism, as a theoretical approach inspired by linguistics and anthropology, insisted on finding commonalities, identities and recurring, self-replicating ‘structures’, poststructuralism emphasized disparities, irremediable **differences**, fragmentation and un-selfsame heterogeneities. But as movements that were themselves disparate in form and

more readily defined negatively by what they were reacting to, both classic critical theory and poststructuralism already contain the germs of postmodernism by their critical recycling of earlier ideas, just as postmodern art cites previous forms of visual or plastic expression. Indeed, postmodernism as both a trend and an object of analysis within the broadly defined field of critical theory draws much inspiration from contemporary developments in the arts. As for what we mean by critical theory writ large, that would encompass the wide array of theoretical, interdisciplinary work in the humanities and social sciences based primarily in the contributions of the Frankfurt School and the various structuralisms while drawing also and heavily upon the older legacy of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx and Ferdinand de Saussure.

Although instances of the term 'postmodern' can be dated back as far as the nineteenth century (see 'Preface'), it came into prominence in the 1970s with the debates in American architecture over the limits of the International Style and its rejection by the likes of Robert Venturi, Paolo Portoghesi, Robert Krier and others.<sup>1</sup> Though the Centre Pompidou (Beaubourg) – completed in January 1977; designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano – is considered by some to be a tribute to late modernism rather than a full-blown expression of postmodernism, it well illustrates key features and concerns of that architectural tendency. Rather than concealing its functional aspects (support girders, heating ducts, water pipes, etc.) under a geometrically clean design, Beaubourg overtly and colourfully flaunts them, exhibiting them to view in a kind of exoskeleton that likewise broadcasts the Centre's proclaimed reinvention of museum and library space. The cohabitation of an open-stack library (exceedingly rare in France), flexible exhibition spaces, cinematheque, coffee shop and so on were meant to make Beaubourg a truly congenial hub of cultural and social interaction. The colourful 'inside-out' design of the building also marks a ludic departure from the stark geometry and forbidding impersonality of high modernist functionalism. A carnivalesque celebration of the arts made public rather than a sombrely respectful and exclusivist cathedral in the eyes of its proponents, Beaubourg represents for its detractors a dangerous pandering to the pressures of mass cultural consumerism and a surrender to the increasing commodification of art in the late twentieth century. Interestingly, this very debate – revisited, for example, in the controversies over I. M. Pei's pyramid entrance to the Louvre built in 1989 – and an increasing unease with any sure distinction between high and low art, count among the harbingers of postmodernism.

In the arts more generally, postmodernism has come to designate the rejection of high modernism and its paragon, abstract expressionism, by movements as diverse as Pop Art, Photorealism and **Trans-avant-gardism**. Inspired most dynamically by the example of Marcel Duchamp (a retrospective of whose work, incidentally, served as the Centre Pompidou's opening exhibit), the postmodern style typically features allusion, pastiche, humour, **irony**, a certain populism and kitsch as well as a resurgent classicism, even a distinct tradition-

alism; in other words, an eclecticism as shocking as its formulations remain unpredictable. What such gestures reject is the high seriousness of modernism, its universalist aspirations that deny local traditions and customs, and the elitism of the artist's vanguard status (as historically 'ahead' of the uncultured masses). In the literary realm, for example, one sees the esoteric *nouveau roman* with its experimentalist programme give way before the populist playfulness of a Georges Perec.

For the postmodern artist, there is no longer anything new about modernism's incessant quest for the 'new', merely the tired assertion of the contemporary as the sole defining gesture of the modern. Instead, postmodernism indulges in a volatile mix of the old with the new, what Charles Jencks has termed '**double-coding**', a concept able to describe an enormous variety of contemporary phenomena from neoclassical influences in the visual arts, to '**retro**' fashions, to the nostalgia film and the technique of 'sampling' in hip-hop music.<sup>2</sup> Rather than claiming absolute novelty as modernism did, postmodernism takes a special pride in manipulating the cliché, the citation, the allusion or the ready-made object, as the very material of its artistic production, as the occasion for its iconoclastic experiments in cultural recycling.

At the same time, this plethora of artistic and cultural responses to modernism has come in turn to be understood by many as a sign of some new socio-historical reality in the wake of a post-industrial world (such as theorized by Daniel Bell)<sup>3</sup> where the classic economic forces of production and industrialization have made way for a service, information and consumer-orientated economy. Postmodernity thus names a **paradigm shift** from the low-tech realm of smokestacks and locomotives to the high-tech world of silicon chips and digital communications. Whether this brave new world represents a break with capitalism or merely a new phase of it remains a source of tremendous discussion and dissension among critical theorists of the postmodern, who are eager to draw correlations between the artistic revolt of postmodernism and our possible entry into a new period of history and a new type of social organization. Postmodern critical theory thereby reopens the old debates about the status of the avant-garde, with various thinkers taking a variety of positions on the degree to which cultural postmodernism is either a reactionary effect of postmodernity, or a radical critique of it.

Within the specific context of critical theory, a frequent topic of debate was whether a given thinker, movement or set of ideas was to be understood as truly postmodern or merely modern. Innumerable academic conferences in the 1980s featured panel discussions or roundtables whose participants either championed or contested the attribution of postmodernism to the subject at hand. Perhaps the grandfather of such debates was the long-running intellectual feud between Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas, a debate which actually had nothing to do with picking sides in the modernist/postmodernist divide but with reassessing the political import of postmodernist theory itself. For Lyotard, the horrendous legacies of the twentieth century (world wars, concentration camps, genocide,

totalitarian regimes of various stripes) motivated an ‘incredulity’ about the utopian promises of modernism and its eschatological **grand narratives** (whether liberal or Marxist) and thus the need for a fundamental change of perspective along the lines of the postmodernity practised in the arts. Habermas vigorously rejected this viewpoint, arguing to the contrary that the horrors of modern times were not the fault of modernism as a system of thought based in Enlightenment ideology but the ongoing proof that these Enlightenment ideals have yet to be put into action or even given a chance. Thus, the divergence of thought between Lyotard and Habermas is as much an argument over the historical legacy of the Enlightenment as anything else. And it is perhaps not surprising that this clash between two intellectual titans drew mightily from their respective studies of the eighteenth century. For Lyotard, this meant his critical immersion in the works of Immanuel Kant as a kind of postmodernist precursor of post-Marxist political practices (cf. *Enthusiasm, Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, various ‘notices’ in *The Differend*).<sup>4</sup> For Habermas, the response followed from his seminal historical study of the development of civil society in the eighteenth century (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*).<sup>5</sup> While both authors’ works represent in their respective ways the culmination of the intellectual and theoretical trajectories each represents, both also point to a future of critical theory in the wake of the postmodernist debate, namely the movement away from high theory toward various forms of historicism, cultural study and identity-based political analysis.

Part of this post-theoretical tendency can already be perceived in the more pessimistic side of the modernity/postmodernity debate that emphasizes the inexorable commodification of artistic production within a media-driven society characterized by a consumerist fascination with images. This is the world Guy Debord has famously called the ‘society of the spectacle’, a society where reality itself comes to be ‘derealized’ through the virtualities of image production and circulation, epitomized by the ubiquity of the television screen and computer monitor.<sup>6</sup> What is meant by this derealization of social reality is that what were once the shared personal experiences of work, family or community have come increasingly to be supplanted by the virtual experience of commonly consumed images via television, cinema, **Internet** and so on. Under postmodern conditions (but as Walter Benjamin also foresaw, under modernism itself), the commodification of art dovetails with the aestheticization of commodities, that is their advertising appeal as well as occasional designation as works of art: Duchamp’s urinal, Warhol’s soup can. For thinkers steeped in Marxist theory, such as Lyotard or Fredric Jameson, this world where images take precedence over their reference in reality represents the final triumph of global capitalism, not merely because of the contemporaneous collapse of communism but, more profoundly, by the extension of marketplace logic from the strictly economic realm of manufacturing into the most intimate corners of cultural and psychical life. Everything can be commodified, bought and sold under postmodern conditions, including all forms of creative expression from emotions to signs to art, hence



too the volatile transmutation of elitist and popular art forms into each other. In Jameson's well-known formulation, postmodernism is thus 'the *cultural* logic of late capitalism'.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, there are those, such as Jean Baudrillard, who see the reformulation of contemporary society around the immateriality of endlessly self-referencing images or '*simulacra*', not as a new phase of capitalism but as the utopian entry into some completely different world, not organized by production, but by some alternative, variously and rather obscurely theorized by him at different moments in his career as 'symbolic exchange', 'seduction' or the 'fatal strategy' of objects.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the terms and themes of postmodernist thought are readily familiar from poststructuralism: heterogeneity, free-floating subjectivity, difference, dispersal, pluralism, discontinuity, indeterminacy and so forth. But whereas poststructuralism developed such concepts by way of a critical interrogation into the conditions of possibility of identity formations, that is, by way of its **deconstruction** of Western forms of idealism, postmodernism translates poststructuralist ideas into both an intellectual *parti pris* – the ubiquitous celebration of difference for its own sake – and the elements putatively descriptive of the current historical state of post-industrial society.

Certainly, the most famous attempt to grasp together the aesthetically celebratory and historically descriptive sides of postmodernism is Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, which is itself rather disingenuously presented as a 'report on knowledge' for the Quebec Ministry of Education. Eschewing the nicety of the distinction between cultural postmodernism and socio-historical postmodernity, Lyotard uses the single term 'postmodern' to refer to both as the specific 'condition' of our times.<sup>9</sup> In *The Postmodern Condition*, what is called the 'postmodern age' corresponds, on the one hand, to the advent of a specifically *post-industrial* society in Bell's sense and, on the other, to a generalized loss of faith in the 'grand narratives' of modernism that had seen the West through its heyday of industrialization, colonization and capital accumulation: whether Enlightenment rationality, liberal democracy, industrial progress or dialectical materialism. All these narratives, Lyotard argues, are modelled on the traditional Christian idea of redemption to the extent that they understand historical process in terms of an endpoint (the triumph of freedom and reason, a classless society, etc.) that will retroactively give meaning and legitimacy to all the toils we must undergo to get there. It is the organizational security of this overarching eschatology that has ceased to function within a postmodern world. The only remaining criterion of legitimacy in the state of globally triumphant capitalism is that of pure efficiency, or what Lyotard calls 'performance'. This rather pessimistic situation of contemporary humanity is what Lyotard terms the 'postmodern condition', and a phenomenon whose intellectual, aesthetic, pedagogical and socio-political consequences the philosopher takes as his or her task to elucidate.

Not that postmodernism constitutes itself therefore simply and self-righteously as a critique of the postmodern condition, for in a world where

performance becomes the only criterion of **legitimation**, criticism, as Lyotard argues, becomes no longer an alternative but itself a part of the system to the extent that the latter solicits and recaptures criticism to bring about improvements in its own efficiency. The inspiration, then, for postmodernism is less frankly denunciatory than strategically *dissimulative* in the Nietzschean sense, less accusatory than ironic, and Nietzsche is thus the philosophical figure who looms large over the postmodern enterprise. And, if anything marks the intellectual crisis of postmodernity – indeed what most saliently names the outrageousness of its dilemma – it is the disappearance of critique as the principal weapon in the intellectual's arsenal. For 'critique' remains inexorably ensnared in the sediment of the modernist grand narrative as the liberatory gesture Kant famously describes of enlightened thought freeing itself – and by extension all of humanity – from the shadows of superstition, fanaticism, repression or ideology. But if the end of criticism is merely to improve by reform the system it criticizes, to make it more 'efficient', to make it 'perform better', then the intellectual is no longer in the utopian position of the radical outsider but unmasked as a prime beneficiary and advocate of the system itself. In France, this particular crisis of the intellectual also dates back to the mid-1970s with the so-called *nouveaux philosophes* (such as André Glucksmann or Bernard-Henri Lévy) who sparked controversy less for the content of their ideas than their self-promotional skills as darlings of the media.

Part of the 'incredulity' towards grand narratives that defines the postmodern condition is also the loss of faith in the hermeneutics of depth associated with them that taught how to reveal the essence behind appearances, the timeless below the transitory, or the inside behind a deceptive exterior. For French thought still reeling from the *événements* of May 1968, this critique of 'critique' is specifically directed against the hermeneutics of Marxism and psychoanalysis, the suspicion being that the critical revelations of the psychoanalyst, far from liberating the analysand, merely enforce the straitjacket of normality (as argued most trenchantly by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*).<sup>10</sup> As for Marxian ideology critique, its analysis of the capitalist extraction of surplus value from human labour would produce not its overcoming but its mirror image, thus surreptitiously advancing the interests of capital even while offering an accurate 'descriptive theory' (Baudrillard's *Mirror of Production*).<sup>11</sup> At its best, the depth analysis that reveals what lies repressed below the social or psychical surface finds but another surface of repression, and beyond that never anything more than the dissimulations of the will to power. The 'incredulity' ascribed by Lyotard to those great narratives comes from the disabused recognition that there cannot be a final cure to repression any more than that a revolution can resolve all social inequities.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the rejection of teleological modes of thinking is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism and a characteristic that distinguishes it from every modernism, which all share a common faith in the attainment of a project yet to be realized: if we all work hard enough, we can all be millionaires, or bring about a communist utopia or a true democracy and so

on. Politics under postmodernism turns away from such projects for an ideal society (whatever the ideal might be) and espouses the resistance of refractory causes or identity groups: ecologists, feminists, gay rights activists, minority politics of all kinds, as well, it must also be said, as ultra-nationalists, neo-fascists and the like. For many, the decline of the traditional political parties and concomitant splintering of the electorate also mean the triumph of politics as spectacle and the pervasive sense that media and image manipulation determine success at the polls.

Where postmodernism and critical theory meet, the classic hermeneutics of depth have also given way to a concern with surfaces, inspired by semiotics' insistence on the externality of the signifier, and exemplified by the slippery play of citations that leaves the text unchanged but saying something very different from itself – the moment of deconstruction, where as Derrida himself states in *Of Grammatology*, there is always the risk that 'the ultra-transcendental text will so closely resemble the precritical text as to be indistinguishable from it'.<sup>13</sup> The deconstruction of identity is ascetically and methodically pursued throughout Derrida's corpus, as if to mourn, Rousseau-like, the loss of ideal identity in an era when such identities have reputedly ceased to function. In Deleuze, the Platonic hierarchy of model over copy that founds the Western ideality of identity and the 'corrupt double' that is representation is overturned by a non-hierarchical concept of mimesis understood as the serial repetition of simulacra without origin or end, that is, in Nietzschean terms, as the eternal return of the same as different. Instead of the rooted primacy of the model over its derived and implicitly deformed copies, the relations between simulacra are as multiple as they are transversal, '**rhizomatic**' rather than 'arboreal', to use Deleuze's vegetative metaphors. *A Thousand Plateaus*, with its complex, multi-layered network of cross-referencing sections, is explicitly presented by Deleuze and Guattari as an attempt to philosophize rhizomatically.<sup>14</sup> For the epistemological nihilist that is Baudrillard, the endless network of signs endlessly referring to other signs with no referent in sight is not just a philosophical conclusion but the post-modern actuality of a media-saturated society where any semblance of reality disappears into what he calls '**hyperreality**'.<sup>15</sup> Far from simply decrying this situation, the Baudrillardian intellectual can only ironically assume and affirm it. The philosophical question then turns around finding the most appropriate modes or genres with which to write, hence the experiments with theory written as fiction, travelogue or autobiography: Baudrillard's *America* and *Cool Memories*; Derrida's *The Post Card*; Lyotard's *Pacific Wall*, *The Postmodern Explained to Children* or *Postmodern Fables*.<sup>16</sup> And so the postmodern eclecticism of the arts, its ironic use of citation and allusion, the double-coded use of traditional forms, come to inform the very way critical theory itself is thought and written in the wake of postmodernity.

But this is to return then to the vexed relation between an aesthetic practice and a historical period. Do critical theorists and post-functionalist architects simply reflect different aspects of a common postmodern predicament? Are they