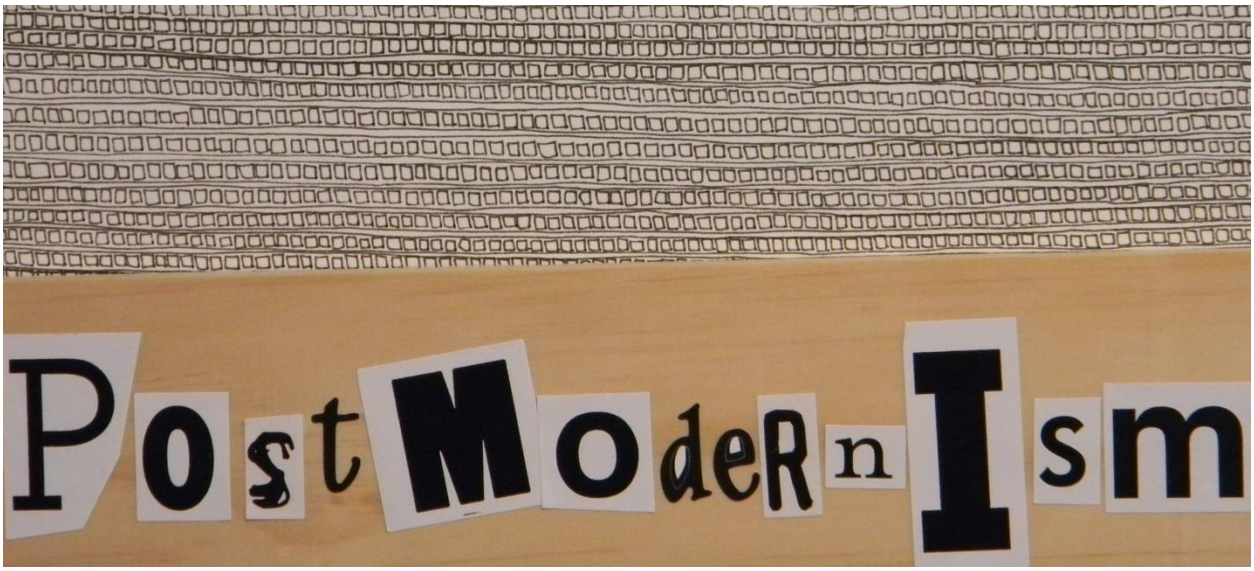
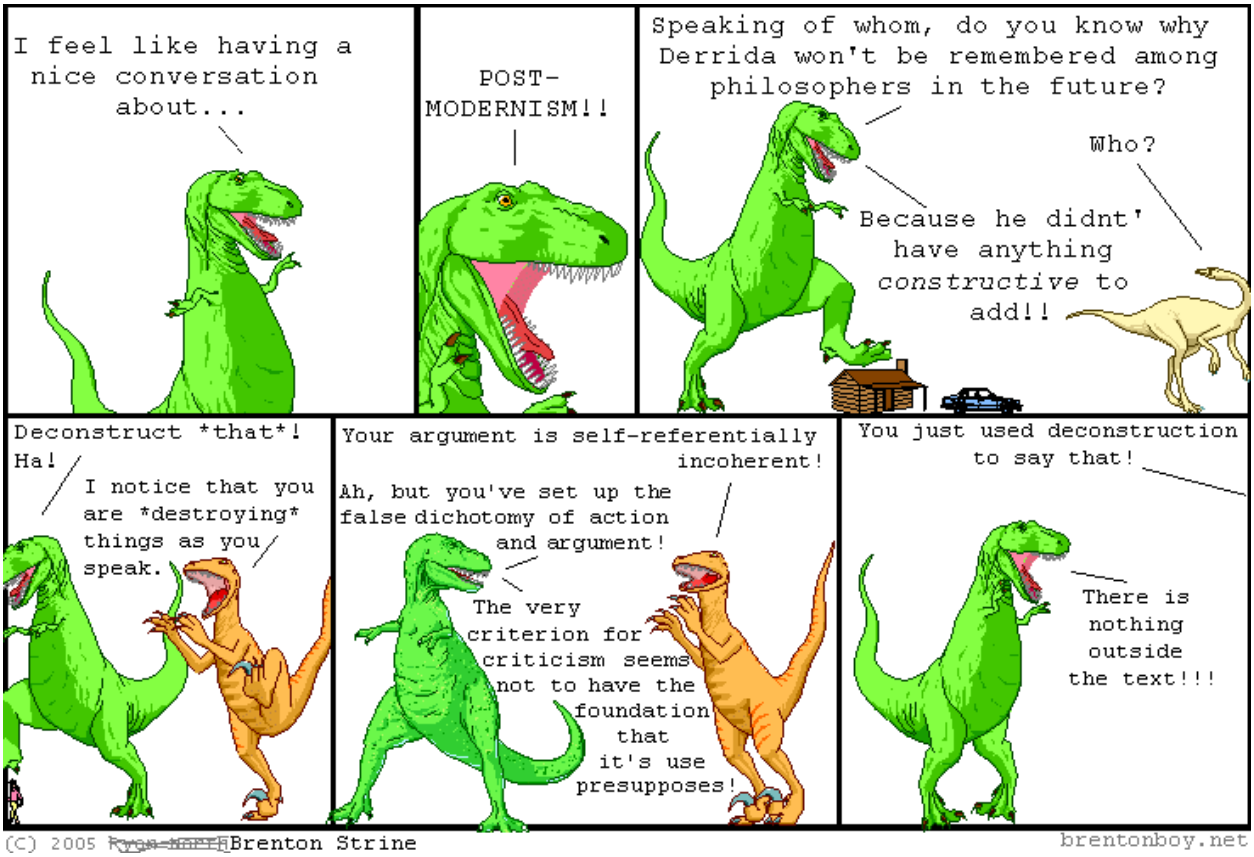

PostModernIsm


I feel like having a nice conversation about...
POST-MODERNISM!!
Speaking of whom, do you know why Derrida won't be remembered among philosophers in the future?
Who?
Because he didnt' have anything *constructive* to add!!
Deconstruct *that*! Ha!
I notice that you are *destroying* things as you speak.
Your argument is self-referentially incoherent!
Ah, but you've set up the false dichotomy of action and argument!
The very criterion for criticism seems not to have the foundation that it's use presupposes!
You just used deconstruction to say that!
There is nothing outside the text!!!
(C) 2005 Brenton Strine
brentonboy.net

Guiding Question

How does each author's dystopian vision reflect port-modernistic ideals?

Defining Postmodernism

• Postmodernism emerges in 1960s and 70s, alongside many of the theories including feminism, new historicism, postcolonialism, etc.

• Wider set of phenomena in art, film, architecture, literature, and popular culture

• Defined by reaction against or further development of modernism:

> Postmodernisms "emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations."
>
> **Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 13**

• Significance of prefix post is that it indicates a break from as well as inherent reliance on whatever follows it

• Key characteristics of postmodernism:

- Blurring of high culture and popular culture (or mass culture)
- Challenge of "grand narratives" (religion, science, etc.)
- Challenge of what constitutes reality - Problematising of time and history
- Death of the individual subject

• Postmodernism and its preoccupations are a result of, or a reaction to, late capitalism and the consumer society of the later twentieth century

• Tied to style and aesthetics as well as to a period in history

High Culture & Popular Culture

• Modernism renowned for distinction between elitist art and literature and low-brow or popular art and literature, e.g.:

Fine Art		Cartoons
Opera		Pop Music
Ballet		Musical
Art Cinema		Television
Classic Literature		Crime fiction, trashy novels
Sculpture		Music Videos

- Postmodernism rebels against distinctions by mixing characteristics and references from both categories:

> "They no longer 'quote' such 'texts' as Joyce might have done [...]; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw."
>
> Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 13

- In fiction, this often leads to intertextual references to both high and low culture as well as to a mixing of genres (resulting in hybrid genres)

Intertextuality

Since postmodernism represents a decentered concept of the universe in which individual works are not isolated creations, much of the focus in the study of postmodern literature is on intertextuality: the relationship between one text (a novel for example) and another or one text within the interwoven fabric of literary history. Critics point to this as an indication of postmodernism's lack of originality and reliance on clichés. Intertextuality in postmodern literature can be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style. In postmodern literature this commonly manifests as references to fairy tales – as in works by Margaret Atwood, Donald Barthelme, and many other – or in references to popular genres such as sci-fi and detective fiction. An early 20th century example of intertextuality which influenced later postmodernists is "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" by Jorge Luis Borges, a story with significant references to Don Quixote which is also a good example of intertextuality with its references to Medieval romances. Don Quixote is a common reference with postmodernists, for example Kathy Acker's novel Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream. Another example of intertextuality in postmodernism is John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor which deals with Ebenezer Cooke's poem of the same name. Often intertextuality is more complicated than a single reference to another text. Robert Coover's Pinocchio in Venice, for example, links Pinocchio to Thomas Mann's Death in Venice. Also, Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose takes on the form of a detective novel and makes references to authors such as Aristotle, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Borges

Grand Narratives

- "Grand narratives" (or "master narratives") coined by Jean-François Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition (1979)
- All knowledge is narrative; knowledge derived from story-telling (myths and legends in tribal times); narratives legitimize knowledge and justify existing power relations
- Religion as narrative: institutionalized narrative knowledge; only one version possible
- In modern era, natural science emerged as new narrative
- Religion and science were (and to some extent still are) universally accepted grand narratives - trying to make sense of history and creating universally accepted narratives
- According to Lyotard, in the postmodern period grand narratives are challenged
- "Grand narratives" cast as old-fashioned and oppressive, allowing only for one version of events, and privileging certain narratives over others, and reinforce existing hierarchies of power

Reality Check

- If all knowledge is narrative, then what does this mean for our perception of reality?
- What is reality? Is it the way science describes the world? Or is it how we perceive the world?

> "We experience the world as flat, even though we know it is round. Likewise, we experience the world as solid matter when we know from physics that it is mostly empty space. In other words, our perception of reality is a fiction we adopt."
>
> **Jan Rosemergy, 'Navigating the Interior Journey: The Fiction of Jeanette Winterson', British Women Writing Fiction, ed. by Abby P. Werlock (University of Alabama Press, 2000), pp.248-269 (p.264)"**

• Jean Baudrillard uses another example to explain "simulation": simulating illness and experiencing real symptoms as result:

> "Simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'. The simulator produces 'real' symptoms, is he or she ill or not? The simulator cannot be treated either as ill or not ill."
>
> **Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra & Simulations", p.168**

• Simulation has <u>become</u> the real; there is no original or real as referent anymore:

> "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."
>
> **Baudrillard, "Simulacra & Simulations", p.166**
>
> "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth which
>
> conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true." Ecclesiastes
>
> **Baudrillard, "Simulacra & Simulations", p.166**

• Simulation is not representation because representation assumes that there is a distinction between the real and the copy and assumes that they're equivalent

Time & History

• Time and history are also narratives (cf. new historicism)

• Time is only "real" in the sense that the sun rises and sets; seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years are human inventions; they're narratives that structure our reality and our understanding and experience of time

Temporal distortion

This is a common technique in modernist fiction: fragmentation and non-linear narratives are central features in both modern and postmodern literature. Temporal distortion in postmodern fiction is used in a variety of ways, often for the sake of irony. Historiographic metafiction (see above) is an example of this. Distortions in time are central features in many of Kurt Vonnegut's non-linear novels, the most famous of which is perhaps Billy Pilgrim in Slaughterhouse-Five becoming "unstuck in time". In Flight to Canada, Ishmael Reed deals playfully with anachronisms, Abraham Lincoln using a telephone for example. Time may also overlap, repeat, or bifurcate into multiple possibilities. For example, in Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" from Pricksongs & Descants, the author presents multiple possible events occurring simultaneously—in one section the babysitter is murdered while in another section nothing happens and so on—yet no version of the story is favored as the correct version.

• Does language create reality or does reality create language?

> "Most bizarre of all, they have no tenses for past, present and future. They do not sense time in that way. For them, time is one. The old man said it was impossible to learn their language without

> learning their world. I asked him how long it had taken him and he said that question had no meaning." - Jeanette Winterson, Sexing the Cherry (1989), pp.134-135

• In postmodern fiction, time is often fragmented (i.e. anti-chronological timelines, jumping forward and backward in time at random, etc.)

• History as a narratirising of events; a story that structures our experiences in a neat timeline

• Postmodernism sees history and fiction as equal; history is a fiction, and fiction is history

• Postmodern novel tends to return to the past and to adopt past forms, mixed with the present

• Jameson argues this is a sign we have become unable to deal with history, and have become unable to express our present experience:

> "As though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself - or, at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.
>
> Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 20

Metafiction

Metafiction is essentially writing about writing or "foregrounding the apparatus", making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader and generally disregards the necessity for "willful suspension of disbelief". It is often employed to undermine the authority of the author, for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance a story in a unique way, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling. For example, Italo Calvino's 1979 novel If on a winter's night a traveler is about a reader attempting to read a novel of the same name. Kurt Vonnegut also commonly used this technique: the first chapter of his 1969 novel Slaughterhouse- Five is about the process of writing the novel and calls attention to his own presence throughout the novel. Though much of the novel has to do with Vonnegut's own experiences during the firebombing of Dresden, Vonnegut continually points out the artificiality of the central narrative arc which contains obviously fictional elements, such as aliens and time travel. Similarly, Tim O'Brien's 1990 novel/story collection The Things They Carried, about one platoon's experiences during the Vietnam War, features a character named Tim O'Brien; though O'Brien was a Vietnam veteran, the book is a work of fiction and O'Brien calls into question the fictionality of the characters and incidents throughout the book. One story in the book, "How to Tell a True War Story", questions the nature of telling stories. Factual retellings of war stories, the narrator says, would be unbelievable and heroic, moral war stories don't capture the truth.

• Linda Hutcheon theorizes this phenomenon differently, as historiographyic metafiction

> "Historiography: The study of the writing of history, the way style, narrative, metaphors, and so on affect how the historical record is received and understood."
>
> A Dictionary of Critical Theory
>
> "Metafiction: Fiction about fiction; or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status."
>
> The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms
>
> "Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in

> historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems"
>
> **Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (1988), p.93**

• Postmodern fiction often plays with "real" historic events, changes them, interweaves personal narratives into them, to challenge what we record and understand as histor

Death of the Subject

• Idea of the individual key to modernism and notions of writing, genius, and style:

> "The great modernisms were, as we have said, predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conceptions of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world to forget its own unique, unmistakable style."
>
> **Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 17**

• Postmodernism suggests that individualism and the individual subject are also illusions, narratives created to give us the impression that we are individual beings with individual powers and choices

• Idea of individual also key to writing as an individual, and writing something original

• Postmodernism argues that there is no originality anymore - everything has been written, said, painted in one form or another, and all we do is piece together versions and mixtures of what already exists

Irony, playfulness, black humor & parody

Linda Hutcheon claimed postmodern fiction as a whole could be characterized by the ironic quote marks, that much of it can be taken as tongue-in-cheek. This irony, along with black humor and the general concept of "play" are among the most recognizable aspects of postmodernism. Though the idea of employing these in literature did not start with the postmodernists (the modernists were often playful and ironic), they became central features in many postmodern works. In fact, several novelists later to be labeled postmodern were first collectively labeled black humorists: John Barth, Joseph Heller, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut, Bruce Jay Friedman, etc. It's common for postmodernists to treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way. A good example of postmodern irony and black humor is found in the stories of Donald Barthelme; "The School", for example, is about the ironic death of plants, animals, and people connected to the children in one class, but the inexplicable repetition of death is treated only as a joke and the narrator remains emotionally distant throughout. The central concept of Joseph Heller's Catch-22 is the irony of the now-idiomatic "catch-22", and the narrative is structured around a long series of similar ironies. Thomas Pynchon in particular provides prime examples of playfulness, often including silly wordplay, within a serious context. The Crying of Lot 49, for example, contains characters named Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks and a radio station called KCUF, while the novel as a whole has a serious subject and a complex structure.

Pastiche

Related to postmodern intertextuality, pastiche means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements. In Postmodernist literature this can be an homage to or a parody of past styles. It can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society. It can be a

combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations in postmodernity: for example, William S. Burroughs uses science fiction, detective fiction, westerns; Margaret Atwood uses science fiction and fairy tales; Umberto Eco uses detective fiction, fairy tales, and science fiction, Derek Pell relies on collage and noir detective, erotica, travel guides, and how-to manuals, and so on. Though pastiche commonly refers to the mixing of genres, many other elements are also included (metafiction and temporal distortion are common in the broader pastiche of the postmodern novel). For example, Thomas Pynchon includes in his novels elements from detective fiction, science fiction, and war fiction; songs; pop culture references; well-known, obscure, and fictional history mixed together; real contemporary and historical figures (Mickey Rooney and Wernher von Braun for example); a wide variety of well-known, obscure and fictional cultures and concepts. In Robert Coover's 1977 novel The Public Burning, Coover mixes historically inaccurate accounts of Richard Nixon interacting with historical figures and fictional characters such as Uncle Sam and Betty Crocker. Pastiche can also refer to compositional technique, for example the cut-up technique employed by Burroughs. Another example is B. S. Johnson's 1969 novel The Unfortunates; it was released in a box with no binding so that readers could assemble it however they chose.

- Jameson explains postmodernism through pastiche and parody:

> "Both pastiche and parody involve the imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles."
>
> **Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 15**

> "Now parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce and imitation which mocks the original. .... In any case, a good or great parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original, just as a great mimic has to have the capacity to put himself/ herself in the place of the person imitated. Still, the general effect of parody is - whether in sympathy or with malice - to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write. So there remains somewhere behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which the style of the great modernists can be mocked."
>
> **Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 16**

> "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor."
>
> **Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 16**

Paranoia

Perhaps demonstrated most famously and effectively in Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and the work of Thomas Pynchon, the sense of paranoia, the belief that there's an ordering system behind the chaos of the world is another recurring postmodern theme. For the postmodernist, no ordering system exists, so a search for order is fruitless and absurd. The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon has many possible interpretations. For example, in Breakfast of Champions by Kurt Vonnegut, the character Dwayne Hoover becomes violent when he's convinced that everyone else in the world is a robot and he is the only human.

The Problems of Postmodernism

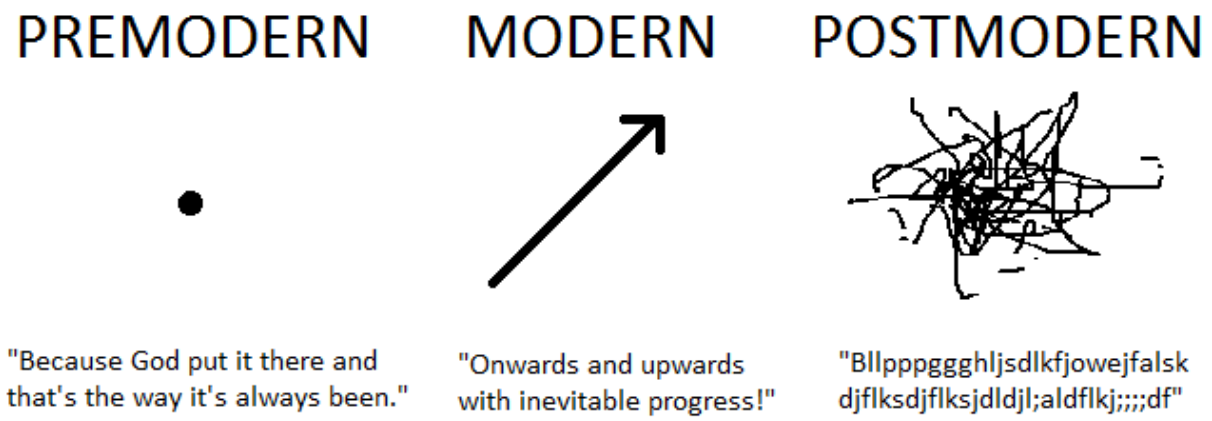
• Postmodernism vs feminism: if the subject is dead, if there is no essence to identity, no stable category of being, then how can feminism defend its existence, given that is operates on the assumption of sexual difference?

> "Feminism and its political claims are made on behalf of a social group, women, who are seen to have an underlying community of interest, and of an embodied female subject whose identity and experiences [...] are necessarily different from those of men'.
>
> **Sue Thornham, 'Postmodernism and Feminism' (2005), p.27**

• Craig Owens argues that relative absence of female and feminist voices in postmodernism suggests the postmodern project 'may be another masculine invention to exclude women'

• Postmodernism may, potentially, have become what it so fervently sets out to deconstruct and challenge: a grand narrative

> "[It is] highly suspicious [...] that the emphasis has been placed on decentering the subject just at the time when women's history has made significant gains by centering on women as the subject of its study."
>
> **Barry, 'The New Historical Syntheses', p.93.**

• Does it challenge or simply replicate the society and conditions of which it is a product?

> "We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces -
>
> reinforces - the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open."
>
> **Jameson, "Postmodernism & Consumer Society", p. 28**