CULTURAL STUDIES
The proliferation of books on the subject of postmodernism is not simply an academic fashion. It is also a significant response to substantive changes in the organization and enactment of our social worlds. In other words, there are material grounds for taking these debates seriously. Much of the primary theoretical work on postmodernism has been produced by writers with no direct affiliation to cultural studies as a ‘discipline’. Nevertheless, the debates and conceptual maps that developed as postmodernism emerged have been filtered into cultural studies. They form the context in which contemporary cultural studies has been developing and permeate the ‘sites’ of cultural studies investigations (Chapters 7–14). The postmodern influence in cultural studies underscores a certain break with its Marxist legacy.

DEFINING THE TERMS

Postmodern theory makes little sense outside of the associated concepts of modernity and modernism. Unfortunately, there is no consensus about what the pertinent concepts mean. For our purposes here:

**KEY CONCEPTS**

- Culture jamming
- Enlightenment
- Grand narrative
- Hyperreality
- Irony
- Modernism
- Modernity
- Postmodernism
- Postmodernity
- Reflexivity
Modernity and postmodernity are terms that refer to historical and sociological configurations. Modernism and postmodernism are cultural and epistemological concepts.

In particular, the concepts of modernism and postmodernism concern:

- cultural formations and cultural experience, for example, modernism as the cultural experience of modernity and postmodernism as a cultural sensibility associated with high or post-modernity;
- artistic and architectural styles and movements, that is, modernism as a style of architecture (Le Corbusier) or writing (Joyce, Kafka, Brecht) and postmodernism in film (Blue Velvet, Blade Runner), photography (Cindy Sherman) or the novel (E.L. Doctorow, Salman Rushdie);
- a set of philosophical and epistemological concerns and positions, that is, thinking about the character of knowledge and truth. Modernism is associated with the enlightenment philosophy of Rousseau and Bacon along with the socio-economic theory of Marx, Weber, Habermas and others. Postmodernism in philosophy has been associated with thinkers as diverse as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Foucault, Rorty and Bauman, not all of whom would welcome that characterization. In broad terms, enlightenment thought seeks after universal truths while postmodernism points to the socio-historical and linguistic specificity of ‘truth’.

THE INSTITUTIONS OF MODERNITY

Modernity is an historical period following the Middle Ages. It is a post-traditional order marked by change, innovation and dynamism. The institutions of modernity can be seen, at least in the account of Giddens (1990), to consist of;

- *industrialism* (the transformation of nature: development of the created environment);
- *surveillance* (control of information and social supervision);
- *capitalism* (capital accumulation within competitive labour and product markets);
- *military power* (control of the means of violence through the industrialization of war).

- Consider the institutions of modernity named above.
- Describe contemporary examples of each of them.
The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution in Britain transformed a pre-industrial society with low productivity and zero growth rates into a society with high productivity and increased growth. Between 1780 and 1840 the British economy changed significantly. There was a shift from domestic production for immediate use to mass consumer goods production for exchange, and from simple, family-centred production to a strict impersonal division of labour deploying capital equipment. The population trebled and the value of economic activity quadrupled (Hobsbawm, 1969). Changes also occurred in personal, social and political life, for example: alterations in working habits, time organization, family life, leisure activity, housing and the shift from rural to urban living.

Surveillance

The emergence of an industrial labour process included an increase in the size and division of labour, mechanization and the intensification of work. The workshop and factory were utilized as a means of exerting discipline and the creation of new work habits (Thompson and McHugh, 1990); that is, they marked new forms of surveillance. As Giddens puts it, ‘who says modernity says not just organizations, but organization – the regularized control of social relations across indefinite time-space distances’ (1990: 91).

Surveillance refers to the collection, storage and retrieval of information. The concept also covers direct supervision of activities and the use of information to monitor subject populations. Modernity did not invent surveillance per se. However, it introduced new and more complex and extensive forms of surveillance. These included shifts from personal to impersonal control. Thus, bureaucratization, rationalization and professionalization form the core institutional configurations of modernity (Dandeker, 1990).

The dynamism of capitalist modernity

The industrial organizations of modernity have been organized along capitalist lines. In the Communist Manifesto, first published in 1848, Marx characterized the processes of enquiry and innovation which marked capitalist modernity as the

Subjection of nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole
populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive powers slumbered in the womb of social labour? (Marx and Engels, 1967: 12)

The productive dynamism of capitalism spawned not just coal but also nuclear power, not just trains but also rockets, not just filing cabinets but also computers and e-mail. Capitalism is restless in its search for new markets, new raw materials, new sources of profit and capital accumulation. It is inherently globalizing. Today the economies of all countries are integrated into the world capitalist economic order (Wallerstein, 1974).

The western originating institutions of modernity are dynamic and globalizing because, as Giddens (1990) argues, modernity fosters relations between ‘absent’ others as transactions are conducted across time and space. Consequently, any given place is penetrated and shaped by social influences that are quite distant from it; that is, the disembedding or ‘lifting out’ of social relations from a local context and their restructuring across time and space. Giddens cites in particular symbolic tokens (e.g. money) and expert systems. Thus the development of money and professional knowledge allows social relations to be stretched (or distanced) across time and space.

Modern life involves the constant examination and alteration of social practices in the light of incoming information about those practices. This reflexivity involves the use of knowledge about social life as a constitutive element of it. That is, reflexivity refers to the constant revision of social activity in the light of new knowledge; for example, the collection of statistical information about populations by governments and commerce in order to facilitate planning and marketing.

The nation-state and military power

The nation-state is a relatively recent modern contrivance. Most of the human beings who have walked the earth did not participate in or identify with state machinery. The modern nation-state is a container of power constituted by a political apparatus recognized to have sovereign rights within the borders of a demarcated territorial area. It possesses the ability to back these claims with military power. The discourse of nationalism is a global one and nation-states emerged in relation to each other. Thus we may speak of a world-wide nation-state system (Giddens, 1985).

Nations are not just political formations. They are also systems of cultural representation by which national identity is continually reproduced through discursive action.
National identity is a form of imaginative identification with the nation-state. This is expressed through symbols and discourses that narrate and create the idea of origins, continuity and tradition (Bhabha, 1990; Hall, 1992b).

The state specializes in the maintenance of order through the rule of law. To a considerable degree this is achieved through a monopoly of legitimate violence. Modern warfare has been underpinned by:

- state military power;
- political ambition;
- emotional investments in national identity.

As Giddens (1985) argues, wars are now fought with industrialized, that is, modern, armies whose soldiers are trained, disciplined and bureaucratized. Arms supplies are produced in factories owned by capitalist corporations who engage in international arms trading.

**MODERNISM AND CULTURE**

The processes by which industrialism, capitalism, surveillance and the nation-state emerged we may call ‘modernization’. ‘Modernism’ refers to the human cultural forms bound up with this modernization (Berman, 1982). Here we are concerned with modernism as a cultural experience or ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1981).

**Modernism as a cultural experience**

✓ Cultural modernism is an experience in which ‘All that is solid melts into air’. This phrase, coined by Marx, suggests change, uncertainty and risk.

Thus, industry, technology and communications systems transformed the human world and continue to do so at a breathless pace. Such transformations hold out the promise of an end to material scarcity. However, they also carry a ‘darker side’. For example, electronics are the basis of modern information technologies. They are at the heart of global wealth production, communications networks and personalized information and entertainment systems. However, they are also the foundations of modern weapons systems and surveillance techniques from ICBMs to high-street CCTV.
To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. (Berman, 1982: 15)

**Risk, doubt and reflexivity**

Modernists have typically displayed an optimistic faith in the power of science, rationality and industry to transform our world for the better. Not that modernism is a culture of certainty. On the contrary, the very dynamism of modernity is premised on the perpetual revision of knowledge. Modern institutions are based on the principle of doubt. All knowledge is formed as a hypothesis that is open to revision (Giddens, 1990, 1991). Indeed, Giddens (1994) sees modernism as a ‘risk culture’. This does not, he argues, mean that modern life is inherently more risky as such. Rather, it is a reference to the way in which risk calculations play a central part in the strategic thinking of both institutions and the lives of ordinary people.

The markers of cultural modernism are:

- ambiguity;
- doubt;
- risk;
- continual change.

Indeed, these qualities are manifested in the very constitution of the modern self. ‘Tradition’ values stability and the place of persons in a normatively ordered and immutable cosmos. By contrast modernism values change, life planning and reflexivity. In the context of tradition, self-identity is primarily a question of social position. For the modern person, it is a ‘project’. By ‘identity project’ is meant the idea that identity is not fixed but created and built on. It is always in process, a moving towards rather than an arrival. Faust is one of the emblematic modern figures. This is because he was determined to make himself and his world even at the cost of a deal with the Devil. According to Harvey (1989), Faust can be regarded as the literary archetype of the dilemma of modern development, that is, the interplay of creation and destruction.

**The flâneur**

Another crucial figure of modernism is Baudelaire’s flâneur. A flâneur, or stroller, walks the anonymous spaces of the modern city experiencing the complexity, disturbances
and confusions of the streets with their shops, displays, images and variety of persons. This perspective emphasizes the urban character of modernism. For Baudelaire, writing of the alienated artist in 1863, the flâneur was one of the heroes of modern life (Baudelaire, 1964). He took in the fleeting beauty and vivid, if transitory, impressions of the crowds, seeing everything anew in its immediacy. Yet this was achieved with a certain detachment.

The flâneur was urban, contemporary and stylish. These are themes that are pursued by Simmel (1978) in relation to the modern concern with fashion. For Simmel, fashion represents a balancing act between individuation and absorption into the collective. It is marked as peculiarly modern by its rapid change and plurality of styles. These form a blueprint for the stylization of the self as a project.

**The dark side of modernity**

The self-image of modernism is one of:

- continual excitement;
- the promise of technological and social progress;
- the etching away of tradition in favour of the new;
- urban development;
- the unfolding of the self.

However, just as Faust was a troubled, destructive and tragic figure, so modernity is marked by:

- the poverty and squalor of industrial cities;
- two destructive world wars;
- death camps;
- the threat of global annihilation.

Simmel (1978) argued that, while, on the one hand, individual liberty increased, people have also been obliged to submit to a rigorous discipline and urban anonymity. This was a theme pursued by Weber (1948, 1978), whose views on the development of modern bureaucracy summed up his deep ambivalence towards the modern world.
For Weber, the march of bureaucracy was an aspect of the spread of secular rationality and rational decision-making procedures. These were based on calculability, rules and expert knowledge. These developments were bound up with the ‘disenchantment’ of the world in favour of economic and technical progress. The Weberian version of bureaucracy stresses impersonality, the allocation of functions, rule systems and the processes of documentation. A bureaucracy is constituted by a framework of rule-governed and ordered activities that continue irrespective of individuals and independent of their personal characteristics. The system relies on fixed and official jurisdictional areas supervised by a stable authority. Weber was convinced of the inexorable advance of bureaucracy; its rationality and efficiency as well as its encroachments on individual self-expression. Bureaucracy was the ‘iron cage’ of material ‘progress’.

In sum, modernism as a ‘structure of feeling’ involves pace, change, ambiguity, risk, doubt and the chronic revision of knowledge. These are underpinned by the social and cultural processes of:

- individualization;
- differentiation;
- commodification;
- urbanization;
- rationalization;
- bureaucratization.

Define each of the terms above.
Give specific examples of the way in which they are associated with the rise of modern culture.

Modernism as aesthetic style

The concept of modernism also carries a narrower focus on the aesthetic forms associated with artistic movements dating from the nineteenth century. Key modernist figures include Joyce, Woolf, Kafka and Eliot in literature, along with Picasso, Kandinsky and Miró in painting. It would be better to talk of modernisms rather than modernism. However, the general themes of artistic modernism include:
• aesthetic self-consciousness;
• an interest in language and questions of representation;
• a rejection of realism in favour of an exploration of the uncertain character of the ‘real’;
• a jettisoning of linear narrative structures in favour of montage and simultaneity;
• an emphasis on the value of aesthetic experience drawn from romanticism;
• an acceptance of the idea of depth and universal mythic-poetic meaning;
• the exploration and exploitation of fragmentation;
• the value and role of avant-garde high culture.

Modernism rejects the idea that it is possible to represent the ‘real’ in any straightforward manner. Representation is not an act of mimesis or a copying of the real. Rather, it is to be understood as an aesthetic expression or conventionalized construction of the ‘real’. In the context of an uncertain and changing world, modernist literature saw its task as finding the means of expression with which to capture the ‘deep reality’ of the world. Hence the concern with aesthetic self-consciousness; that is, an awareness of the place of form, and particularly language, in the construction of meaning. This is manifested in the experimental approach to the aesthetic style characteristic of modernist work that seeks to express depth through fragmentation.

The problems of realism

Modernism accepts the meaningfulness of a reality that lies beneath or beyond appearance. Consequently, it dispenses with the idea of naturalism/realism as a form that unproblematically represents the real. For modernists, the problem with realism is that it purports to ‘show things as they really are’ rather than acknowledging its own status as an artifice. Further, the narrative structures of realism are organized by a ‘metalanguage’ of truth that privileges and disguises the editorial position rather than letting different discourses ‘speak for themselves’ and compete for allegiance (MacCabe, 1981).

Modernists require practices that reveal their own techniques and allow for reflection upon the very processes of signification. Thus, modernism’s stories do not follow the established conventions of linear causality or the ‘ordinary’ flow of everyday time. If any one style can be said to encapsulate modernism, it is the use of montage; that is, the selection and assemblage of shots or representations to form a composite of juxtaposed ideas and images. This montage is not ‘held together’ by realist notions of time and motivation. For example, Jean-Luc Godard used montage to explore the fragmented multiple discourses of the real and encourage audiences to examine the very process by which meaning was constructed.
Modernism incorporates the tensions between, on the one hand, fragmentation, instability and the ephemeral, and on the other hand, a concern for depth, meaning and universalism. Modernist writers have commonly rejected universalism founded on God. Nevertheless, they have propounded the universals of a humanism grounded in mythic-poetic narratives (which Art has the function of uncovering and constructing). Art

Fragmentation and the universal

This is a picture of Casa Batilo in Barcelona, Spain, which was designed by Antonio Gaudí (1852–1926). It is in the style of Catalan Modernisme or Art Nouveau.

- Although not strictly part of the modernist movement, the design shares features with modernism. What are they?
- The design also seems to prefigure features of postmodernism. Can you suggest what they might be?
replaces God as the foundational narrative of human existence. For example, Joyce’s *Ulysses* is regarded as the archetype of high modernist novels because of its stream of consciousness, non-realist, narrative style. Through this style, Joyce attempts to represent the real in new ways, using language to capture the fragmented character of the self. Joyce would have agreed with Nietzsche that ‘God is dead’, and that there can be no cosmic universals. However, he does offer us a sense that Art can draw on, and reconfigure, universal mythic-poetic meanings. Thus, a day in the life of one Dubliner is framed in terms of the universalist Ulysses of Greek myth.

**The cultural politics of modernism**

One route to understanding modernism as a form of cultural politics is to explore the debates about form in the work of Lukács (1972, 1977), Adorno (1977; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979) and Brecht (1964, 1977). Lukács opposes modernism on the grounds that its concern with fragmentation, alienation and angst merely reflects the surface appearance of the world. Modernism represents for Lukács a retreat into the subjective world of angst in which the exterior world is an unchangeable horror (e.g. Kafka). Lukács charges modernism with formalism, that is, an obsession with form lacking significant content. Instead, he champions a realism which, he argues, goes beyond the world of appearance to express the true nature of reality, its underlying trends, characteristics and structures.

By contrast, for Adorno (1977), the modernist works of Kafka, Beckett and Schoenberg are amongst the most radical of art forms. They ‘arouse the fear that existentialism merely talks about’. Modernism is said to highlight the alienating features of capitalism. Further, it engenders a critical activity on the part of audiences. In particular, it is the form taken by modernist art that allows it to stand as a beacon of hope and a symbol of non-accommodation. This ‘negativity’ lies in its refusal to be incorporated by the dominant language of contemporary culture.

Brecht complicates the distinction between modernism and realism. He takes up the ‘demystifying’ purposes Lukács attributes to realism (‘discovering the causal complexes of society’), while allying them to modernist techniques. Brecht argues that, since reality changes, so the political purposes of realism have to be expressed through new, modern forms. Brecht is laying claim to be the new, true and popular realist by using modernist forms. He is associated with the ‘alienation device’, for example:

- addressing the audience directly;
- staging singing spectacles;
- alluding to the constructed characteristics of plays.

These techniques aim to change the relationship between the stage and the audience so that the latter are led to reflect on meaning and the processes of signification.
Modernisms

The Lukács–Adorno–Brecht debates highlight the need to talk about modernisms rather than modernism. Any concept that can put Joyce, Kafka, Picasso and Brecht all in the same basket is operating at a high level of generality. However, we may say that modernism makes the whole idea of representation problematic. It deploys non-linear, non-realist modes while retaining the idea of the real. Modernism rejects metaphysical foundations. Nevertheless, it replaces them with narratives of progress and enlightenment which Art functions to illuminate. By Art is meant the work of a high culture demanding reflection and engagement from its audience. Thus, modernism retains the distinction between good and bad art, between popular culture and high culture. Whatever the differences between Lukács, Adorno, Brecht, Godard, Joyce and Eisentein, they do share the modern conception that the world is knowable and that true knowledge of it is possible. Indeed, the single biggest divide between modernism and postmodernism is their respective conceptualizations of truth and knowledge, that is, questions of epistemology.

MODERN AND POSTMODERN KNOWLEDGE

Modernity has been associated with an emancipatory project through which enlightenment reason would lead to certain and universal truths. This would lay the foundations for humanity’s forward path of progress. That is, enlightenment philosophy and the theoretical discourses of modernity have championed ‘Reason’ as the source of progress in knowledge and society.

The enlightenment project

Enlightenment thought is marked by its belief that Reason can demystify and illuminate the world over and against religion, myth and superstition. For enlightenment thinkers, human creativity, rationality and scientific exploration mark the break with tradition that modernity heralds. The moral-political agenda of the ‘project of modernity’ is best encapsulated in the French Revolutionary slogan ‘Equality, Liberty, Fraternity’.

✓ In both its scientific project and its moral-political project, enlightenment philosophy sought universal truths. That is, knowledge and moral principles that applied across time, space and cultural difference.

Enlightenment philosophy can be explored through the writings of key eighteenth-century philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau and Hume. However, two much later and apparently
contradictory streams of thought are explored here to illustrate the practical implications of enlightenment epistemology, that is, Taylorism and Marxism.

**Scientific management**

F.W. Taylor developed his ideas during the late 1880s and published his *Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911. He claimed, on the basis of scientific knowledge, to provide the *one* best way of organizing production processes to achieve efficiency. We may summarize Taylor’s main arguments thus:

- the organization of the division of labour to allow for separation of tasks and functions;
- the use of time and motion studies to measure and describe work tasks;
- the prescription of tasks to workers in minute degrees;
- the use of incentive schemes and money as motivation;
- the importance of management in planning and control.

The organization of production along Taylorist lines was manifested in the standardization and mechanization of factory assembly lines, for example those associated with the early days of the Ford motor company. However, the influence of Taylorism has spread much further afield than the factory. It can be seen in the managerial control strategies of service industries, education systems, state administration and even mass party politics. For Braverman (1974), Taylorism is best explored as an ideology of management and control. In modified forms, it became the orthodox doctrine of technical control in both western capitalism and Soviet communism.

In short, Taylorism encapsulates that which Habermas (1972) calls the ‘instrumental rationality’ underpinning domination. That is, Taylorism puts the logic of rationality and science to work in the service of the regulation, control and domination of human beings. While promising material benefits, Taylorism expresses a ‘dark side’ of enlightenment thought.

**Marxism as enlightenment philosophy**

Braverman and Habermas draw considerable intellectual resources from Marxism, which can also be regarded as a child of enlightenment thought. According to Marx (Chapter 1), capitalism engenders class conflict and sows the seeds of its own destruction. It is the proletariat’s historical role to overthrow capitalism, and in doing so to liberate all people. It does this by bringing into being a new society based on need rather than exploitation. That is, capitalism is supplanted by socialist and communist modes of production.
The stress on scientific thought, historical progress, human creativity and the emancipatory role of the proletariat makes Marxism a form of enlightenment thought. However, for Habermas (1972, 1987), it differs from Taylorism in being not so much instrumental rationality as critical rationality. That is, Marxism deploys the logic of rationality in the service of critiquing capitalism and liberating human beings from exploitation and oppression. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Marxism also contains the ‘dark side’ of enlightenment thinking. Marxism continues the form of rationality by which humans seek to conquer and control nature. Thus, Adorno accused Marx of wanting to turn the whole world into a factory through the continual expansion of our productive capacities.

**Scientific laws and the principle of doubt**

One reading of Marx posits human history as the unfolding of an inevitable developmental logic leading from feudalism to communism. History in this sense has its own telos or inevitable point towards which it is moving. History is governed by the laws of human evolution and progress. This mechanical reading of Marxism underpins the idea of a vanguard party (the Leninist communist party) that has a true knowledge of history. Consequently, the Party ‘knows best’ how to guide us. In other words, the seeds of Soviet totalitarianism are inherent in the epistemological base of Marxism as a philosophy of history.

In this sense, Taylorism and Marxism share a common epistemology based on the enlightenment principles of science and true knowledge. The idea that there could be ‘laws of history’ is a manifestation of the scientism of Marxism, that is, its wish to emulate the (alleged) scientific certainty of physics and chemistry. The confidence of modern science allows it to hail itself as ‘progress’, symbolized by medicine, despite the now constant threat of nuclear annihilation.

Yet modernism is ambiguous for it is far from clear that science does proceed through laws of certainty. For example:

- Science proceeds through experimentation and the principle of falsification (Popper, 1959).
- Science periodically overthrows its own paradigms (Kuhn, 1962).
- The Einsteinian paradigm that currently predominates is one of relativity.

Hence, Giddens (1991) regards modern science as premised on the methodological principle of doubt and the chronic revision of knowledge. Enlightenment science may have begun with the search for certain laws but is now beset with doubt and chaos.

Enlightenment thought in its many manifestations promises increased levels of material production and the abolition of want and suffering. It promotes the development of medicine, universal education, political freedom and social equality. However, the dark
side of modernity is regarded by some thinkers as not merely an aberration or side-effect of enlightenment thinking but as inherent in it. Thinkers as diverse as Adorno, Nietzsche, Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard have criticized the impulses of modernity for heralding not progress, but domination and oppression. The modern world is seen as having to give a rational account of everything – ‘interrogating everything’, as Foucault describes it. In this characterization, Reason leads not to the alleviation of material needs or philosophical enlightenment but to control and destruction. Reason can, at the very least, be argued to have turned out to be selective and unbalanced.

**The critique of the enlightenment**

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) argue that enlightenment rationality is a logic of domination and oppression. The very impulse to control nature through science and rationality is, they argue, an impulse to control and dominate human beings. In this view, enlightenment thinking is inherently an instrumental rationality. Its logic leads not only to industrialization but also to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Belsen. Adorno and Horkheimer characterize enlightenment thinking as positing an ‘identity’ between thought and its objects that seeks to capture and subsume all that is different from itself. They regard enlightenment reason as turning rationality into irrationality and deception as it eliminates competing ways of thinking and claims itself as the sole basis for truth.

**Foucault**

Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of enlightenment thought remains pertinent. However, the work of Foucault has been more influential within cultural studies.

Nietzsche: truth as a mobile army of metaphors  
Foucault is indebted to the philosopher Nietzsche, for whom knowledge is a form of the ‘will to power’. The idea of a pure knowledge is impermissible because reason and truth are ‘nothing more than the expediency of a certain race and species – their utility alone is their truth’ (Nietzsche, 1967: §515). Nietzsche characterizes truth as a ‘mobile army of metaphors and metonyms’. That is, sentences are the only things that can be true or false. Knowledge is not a question of true discovery but of the construction of interpretations about the world that are taken to be true.

For Nietzsche, the truth is not a collection of facts. There can be only interpretations and there is ‘no limit to the ways in which the world can be interpreted’. In so far as the idea of truth has a historical purchase, it is the consequence of power, that is, of whose interpretations count as truth. Consequently, Nietzsche rejects the enlightenment philosophy of universal reason and progress.
Foucault’s archaeology  Foucault’s early work deploys a methodological approach described as archaeology. By this he means the exploration of the specific and determinate historical conditions under which statements are combined and regulated to form and define a distinct field of knowledge/objects. This domain of knowledge requires a particular set of concepts that delimit a specific ‘regime of truth’ (i.e. what counts as truth). Foucault attempts to identify the historical conditions and determining rules for the formation of regulated ways of speaking about objects; that is, discursive practices and discursive formations.

Foucault (1972, 1973) argues that in the transition from one historical era to another, the social world is no longer perceived, described, classified and known in the same way. That is, discourse is discontinuous. It is marked by historical breaks in understanding, changes in the way objects are conceptualized and understood. Different historical eras are marked by different epistemes, or configurations of knowledge, that shape the social practices and social order of particular historical periods. For example, Foucault points to a rupture in the historical understanding of madness. Thus, modern reason breaks off any dialogue with madness and seeks to set up oppositions between madness and reason, the sane and the insane. In this view, history is not to be explained in terms of connections across historical periods (though breaks are never complete and are to be understood on the basis of that which already exists). Nor should it be understood in terms of the inevitable movement of history from locatable origins towards a predetermined destiny. Foucault’s stress on discontinuity is an aspect of his questioning of the modern themes of genesis, teleology, continuity, totality and unified subjects.

Foucault’s genealogy  Archaeology suggests an excavation of the past in one specific site. Genealogy (Foucault’s name for his later approach) takes the form of tracing the historical continuities and discontinuities of discourse. Here Foucault emphasizes the material and institutional conditions of discourse and the operations of power. Archaeology digs up the local sites of discursive practice. Genealogy examines the way in which discourse develops and is brought into play under specific and irreducible historical conditions through the operations of power.

‘[A]rchaeology’ would be the appropriate method of the analysis of local discursivities, and ‘genealogy’ would be the tactics whereby on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were released would be brought into play. (Foucault, 1980: 85)

[Genealogy] must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality … it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engage in different roles … it depends on a vast accumulation of source material. (Foucault, 1984a: 76)
Foucault’s genealogical studies examine prisons, schools and hospitals in order to show the operations of power and discipline. They concentrate on the formation and use of knowledge, including the construction of the subject as an ‘effect’ of discourse (Chapter 7). Foucault argued that discourse regulates not only what can be said under determinate social and cultural conditions but also who can speak, when and where. Specifically, the ‘regimes of truth’ of modernity involve relations of power/knowledge whereby knowledge is a form of power implicated in the production of subjectivity. Crucially, Foucault argues that:

criticism is no longer going to be practised in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological – and not transcendental – in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what is impossible for us to do and know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. (Foucault, 1984b: 45–6)

**KEY THINKERS**

**Michel Foucault (1926–84)**

Foucault is a major figure in French philosophy whose work has been influential in cultural studies. He is associated with the ideas of poststructuralism. Foucault explored the discursive practices that exert power over human bodies but without any commitment to an underlying structural order or finally determinate power. Foucault also attempts to identify the historical conditions and determining rules of the formation of discourses and their operation in social practice. Much of his work is concerned with the historical investigation of power as a dispersed capillary woven into the fabric of the social order that is not simply repressive but also productive.

Breaking with the enlightenment  Foucault’s thinking breaks with the premises of ‘classical’ enlightenment thought in five key ways:

1. Knowledge is not metaphysical, transcendental or universal. Rather, it is specific to particular times and spaces. Foucault talks not of truth per se, but of ‘regimes of truth’; that is, the configurations of knowledge that ‘count as truth’ under determinate historical conditions.

2. Knowledge is perspectival in character. There can be no one totalizing knowledge that is able to grasp the ‘objective’ character of the world. Rather, we both have and require multiple viewpoints or truths by which to interpret a complex, heterogeneous human existence.

3. Knowledge is not regarded as a pure or neutral way of understanding. It is implicated in regimes of power.

4. Foucault breaks with the central enlightenment metaphor of ‘depth’. He argues against interpretative or hermeneutic methods that seek to disclose the hidden meanings of language. Foucault is concerned with the description and analysis of the surfaces of discourse and their effects under determinate material and historical conditions.

5. Foucault casts doubt on the enlightenment understanding of progress. Knowledge as discourse does not unfold as an even historical evolution but is discontinuous. That is, Foucault identifies significant epistemological breaks in knowledge across time. He rejects any notion of telos or the inevitable direction of human history.

However, the idea that there is a clear, distinctive and final break between enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought, or between the modern and postmodern, is challenged by Foucault. He suggests that we do not have to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ the enlightenment. It is a question not of accepting or rejecting enlightenment rationality but of asking:

What is this reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers? ... [If] philosophy has a function within critical thought, it is precisely to accept this sort of spiral, this sort of revolving door of rationality that refers us to its necessity, to its indispensability, and at the same time to its intrinsic dangers. (Foucault, 1984c: 249)

Postmodernism as the end of grand narratives

Foucault did not designate himself a postmodern thinker. However, other writers, most notably Lyotard, have embraced the perspectival conception of knowledge and the term
‘postmodern’ with greater alacrity. Lyotard argues that truth and meaning are constituted by their place in specific local language-games and cannot be universal in character. For Lyotard, the postmodern condition is not a periodizing concept, that is, the postmodern is not an historical epoch. Nor does the concept refer to the institutional parameters of modernity and postmodernity. Rather, it is

the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word postmodern to describe that condition … it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the rules for science, literature, and the arts. (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii)

For Lyotard, modern knowledge rests on its appeal to metanarratives, that is, grand historical stories which claim universal validity. By contrast, the postmodern, in arguing that knowledge is specific to language-games, embraces local, plural and heterogeneous knowledges. The postmodern condition involves a loss of faith in the foundational schemes that have justified the rational, scientific, technological and political projects of the modern world. This is what Lyotard describes as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’. By this he means that there remain no viable metanarratives (or elevated standpoints) from which to judge the universal truth of anything. For Lyotard, we should resist the totalizing terror of such dogmas in favour of the celebration of difference and understandings located within particular knowledge regimes.

**Explain in your own words what is meant by the phrase ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’.

Examples of grand narrative might be:
Marxism;
Science;
Christianity.

- What features do they have in common that make them ‘metanarratives’?

**The end of epistemology**

✓ For postmodernism, no universalizing epistemology is possible because all truth claims are formed within discourse. There are no universal philosophical foundations for human thought or action. All truth is culture-bound.
This is so because there can be no access to an independent object world that is free from language. There is no Archimedean vantage point from which to evaluate claims neutrally. Indeed, Rorty suggests that the concept of truth has no explanatory power. The notion of truth refers at best to a degree of social agreement within a particular tradition. Rorty recommends that we abandon epistemology, recognizing ‘truth’ as a form of social commendation (Rorty, 1989, 1991a) – a condition that Foucault described as ‘being-in-the-true’.

Gergen (1994) agrees that no epistemological position is able to give universal grounding for its own truth claims. This includes modern science and postmodernism. However, he also argues that the consequences of adopting a modern or postmodern epistemology are different. According to Gergen, modern truth claims are universalizing: they assert their truths for all people in all places. This has potentially disastrous disciplining consequences in which the bearers of ‘truth’ know best. In contrast, Gergen suggests that the consequence of saying that truths are only truths within specific language-games is to accept the legitimacy of a range of truth claims, discourses and representations of ‘reality’.

**Relativism or positionality?**

For some commentators, postmodernism is held to be a form of relativism. That is, truth claims are said to be of equal epistemological status. Consequently, we are unable to make judgements between forms of knowledge. Gergen embraces the term ‘relativism’, arguing that truth is/should be an outcome of debates between competing claims. Rorty rejects relativism as self-contradictory in favour of the culturally specific character of truth, that which cultural studies would call positionality. He argues that there is no standpoint from which one can see across different forms of knowledge and regard them of equal value. Rather, we are always positioned within acculturalized knowledge, so that the true and the good are what we believe. For Rorty, the true and the good are judged in terms of pragmatism, that is, the consequences of adopting certain kinds of understanding. Such judgements can only be made by reference to our values and not to a transcendental truth.

**THE PROMISE OF POSTMODERNISM (OR MODERNITY AS AN UNFINISHED PROJECT?)**

For Bauman (1991), postmodernism has the potential to give voice to a liberatory politics of difference, diversity and solidarity. He argues that the condition of postmodernity is the modern mind reflecting upon itself from a distance and sensing the urge to change.
The uncertainty, ambivalence and ambiguity of the postmodern condition, argues Bauman, open up the possibility of grasping contingency as destiny. In this way we may create our own futures. To do so we must transform tolerance into solidarity, not just as a matter of moral perfection, but a condition of survival … Survival in the world of contingency and diversity is possible only if each difference recognizes another difference as the necessary condition of the preservation of its own. Solidarity, unlike tolerance, its weaker version, means a readiness to fight; and joining the battle for the sake of the other’s difference, not one’s own. Tolerance is ego-centred and contemplative; solidarity is socially oriented and militant. (Bauman, 1991: 256)

**Politics without foundations**

There are no guarantees or universal foundations for such a project. It remains only a possibility inherent in postmodern culture. As Bauman argues, liberty remains truncated, diversity thrives only in so far as the market drives it, tolerance slips into indifference and consumers replace citizens. Yet, he suggests, postmodern culture implies the need for politics, democracy, full-blown citizenship and the potential withdrawal of consent from the political edifice of the state. The postmodern mentality demands that modernity fulfil the promises of its, albeit distorted, reason.

Critics of postmodernism fear that the abandonment of foundationalism leads to irrationalism and the inability to ground any radical politics. Yet the legitimacy of a range of truth claims is in itself a political position for it signals support for pragmatic postmodern cultural pluralism. Thus, we do not require universal validations and foundations to pursue a pragmatic improvement of the human condition. We can do this on the basis of the values of our own tradition (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Rorty, 1991a).

These are themes of the politics of difference (Chapter 14) seen in the politics of race, of feminism, and of queer politics, amongst others.

**Modernity as an unfinished project**

Postmodern ‘epistemology’ has not gone unchallenged. The doubt and uncertainty that characterize contemporary knowledge are seen by Giddens (1990, 1991) as the condition, not of postmodernity, but of a ‘radicalized modernity’. In his view, relativity, uncertainty, doubt and risk are core characteristics of late or high modernity. Similarly, Habermas (1987, 1989) sees the political project of modernity as ongoing. The basis of his argument is the distinction he makes between ‘instrumental reason’ and ‘critical reason’. He is censorious of enlightenment reason for the instrumentality by which the ‘lifeworld’ is colonized by ‘system imperatives’; that is, the subordination of social-existential questions to money and administrative power. In this sense, Habermas views Reason as unbalanced
and selective. However, the enlightenment also has a critical side, which for him is the basis of an emancipatory project which remains unfinished.

Habermas works within the tradition of critical theory. He has sought universal grounds for the validation of evaluative judgement and claims to human emancipation. He does so by arguing that all human interaction presupposes language. In the structure of speech we may find the essential grounding conditions for all forms of social organization. When we speak, suggests Habermas, we are making four validity claims:

1. to comprehensibility;
2. to truth;
3. to appropriateness;
4. to sincerity.

These claims, he argues, imply both the logical justification of truth and the social context for their rational debate. The conditions for this Habermas labels as an ‘ideal speech situation’. Here competing truth claims are subject to rational debate and argument. In an ‘ideal speech situation’, truth is not subject to the vested interests and power plays of truth-seekers. Rather, it emerges through the process of argumentation.

The public sphere

For Habermas, our very ability to make truth claims is dependent on a democratically organized public sphere which approximates an ‘ideal speech situation’. The notion of a public sphere is traced historically by Habermas as a realm that emerged in a specific phase of ‘bourgeois society’. It is a space that mediates between society and the state where the public organizes itself and where ‘public opinion’ is formed. Habermas describes the rise of literary clubs and salons, newspapers, political journals and institutions of political debate and participation in the eighteenth century. This public sphere was partially protected from both the church and the state by the resources of private individuals. It was, in principle, though not in practice, open to all. Within this sphere individuals were able to develop themselves and engage in rational debate about the direction of society.

Habermas goes on to document the decline of the public sphere. This has happened as a consequence of the development of capitalism towards monopoly and the strengthening of the state. For example, the increased commodification of everyday life by giant corporations transforms people from rational citizens to consumers. Of particular concern are the non-rational products of the advertising and public relations industries. In a parallel erosion of the public sphere, the state has taken increased power over our lives. In
the economic realm it has acted as a corporate manager, and in the private realm as the manager of welfare provision and education.

The concept of the public sphere in the work of Habermas is a philosophical, historical and normative one. On the historical level there has been considerable criticism of the historical accuracy of the concept (Curran, 1991) and of the male gender bias of the bourgeois public sphere (Fraser, 1995b). Others (Thompson, 1995) have suggested that the modern media have actually expanded the public sphere. More philosophically, some postmodern critics, particularly Lyotard, argue that Habermas reproduces the totalizing discourse of ‘Enlightenment Reason’, ignoring its repressive character. Honneth (1985) has countered that Lyotard has a mistaken interpretation of Habermas’s discursive ethics. Their purpose, he argues, lies not in the final determination of common needs, but in intersubjective agreement about the very social norms that allow different needs to be articulated and realized. By this he means that Habermas is stressing the importance of the democratic process rather than the outcome of that process.

A normative project

Whatever the historical problems with Habermas’s work, as a normative position the idea of a public sphere retains an appeal. Postmodernists, poststructuralists and neo-pragmatists would all think Habermas mistaken in his attempt to construct a universal and transcendental rational justification for the public sphere. However, the concept retains normative political leverage. It can be justified on the pragmatic grounds of cultural pluralism rather than epistemological grounds. That is, the public sphere (or spheres) should be able to accommodate difference as a vital principle.

✓ The emancipatory project of modernity is best served by a commitment to ‘postmodern’ public spheres based on difference, diversity and solidarity.

POSTMODERN CULTURE

There have been significant cultural changes in contemporary life that have been described in the language of the ‘postmodern’. These social and cultural changes are at the leading edge of the society and are pointing to its future (or are already the dominant configuration). This ‘postmodern era’ does not necessarily represent a sharp break with the modern. Rather, it is a transitional period of changing economic, social and cultural patterns which are shaping the contours of the future.
The postmodern does not have to mean postmodernity (as an historical period) but rather indicates a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1979, 1981) and a set of cultural practices. Core to the postmodern ‘structure of feeling’ are:

- a sense of the fragmentary, ambiguous and uncertain nature of living;
- an awareness of the centrality of contingency;
- a recognition of cultural difference;
- an acceleration in the pace of living.

The reflexive postmodern

Without the certainties of traditional religious and cultural beliefs, modern life may appear as a series of proliferating choices to be made without foundations. This encourages us to be more reflexive about ourselves, since we have no certainties to fall back on. Reflexivity can be understood as ‘discourse about experience’ (Gergen, 1994: 71). To engage in reflexivity is to partake in a range of discourses and relationships while constructing further discourses about them. Reflexivity enables increased possibilities for the playful self-construction of multiple identities. It also requires that we compare our traditions with those of others. Consequently, postmodern culture invites the ‘other’ of modernity, those voices that had been suppressed by the modern drive to extinguish difference, to find ways to speak. Such voices include those of feminism, ethnic diasporas, ecologists, ravers and travellers.

Reflexivity encourages an ironic sense of the ‘said before’: the feeling that one cannot invent anything new but can merely play with the already existent. Eco (1986) gives a good example of this with the person who cannot, without irony, say ‘I love you’ but prefaces it with the words ‘As Barbara Cartland would say’. The thing is said, but the unoriginality is also acknowledged. Indeed, irony, understood as a reflexive understanding of the contingency of one’s own values and culture, is the key sensibility of postmodernism. A widespread awareness of the history of film, television, music and literature promotes this feeling. For example, television has a history and repeats that history within and across channels. Thus ‘television produces the conditions of an ironic knowingness’ (Caughie, 1990).

Two riders need to be attached to the notion of reflexive postmodern culture as a liberatory one:

1. Increased social and institutional reflexivity is manifested in the desire of institutions to know more about their workforce, customers and clients. This involves increased forms of surveillance, from cameras in shopping centres and ‘quality management’ at work, to the increased significance of marketing.
2 The experience of postmodern culture cannot be assumed to be the same for all people regardless of their class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc. A more finely grained sociological analysis would need to take account of the variable experiences of postmodern culture.

Postmodernism and the collapse of cultural boundaries

Lash (1990) identifies the shift from the ‘discursive’ to the ‘figural’ as core to the postmodern turn. By this he means that the signifying logics of the modern and postmodern work in different ways. The increasing prominence of the postmodern ‘figural’ is integral to the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’ and to the erosion of the cultural boundaries of modernity.

The modernist ‘regime of signification’

• prioritizes words over images;
• promulgates a rationalist world view;
• explores the meanings of cultural texts, and distances the spectator from the cultural object.

By contrast, the postmodern ‘figural’

• is more visual;
• draws from everyday life;
• contests rationalist views of culture;
• immerses the spectator in his/her desire in the cultural object.

✓ Postmodern culture is marked by the blurring and collapse of the traditional boundaries between culture and art, high and low culture, commerce and art, culture and commerce.

For example, the rise in the visibility and status of popular culture, hastened by the electronic media, has meant that the distinction between high and low culture is no longer viable: ‘High culture becomes just one more sub-culture, one more opinion, in our midst’ (Chambers, 1986: 194). Further, the collapse of attempts to sustain art/high culture: commercial/low culture distinctions, combined with the recognition of the interpretative work of active audiences, has undone the obviousness of the critique of commodity culture by both the political ‘right’ and ‘left’. More recently the emergence of Remix culture (see Chapter 11) involves non-professional audience members generating cultural texts
that cross and blur the boundaries of cultural forms. Remixes are produced through the ‘cut and paste’ and ‘sampling’ of existing content in order to produce something which is new.

A well known example is Danger Mouse, aka Brian Burton, who mashed together The Beatles’ *White Album* and Jay-Z’s *Black Album* to create a history making mash-up called *The Grey Album*. *The Grey Album* has become iconic because after Danger Mouse released it line, the copyright holders the EMI music corporation issued cease and desist notices. In response a music activist group called Downhill Battle organized a protest movement called Grey Tuesday in which they asked websites around the world to put up the album for a day, and which was a great success. EMI not only backed off but also hired Danger Mouse who went on to become half of the successful duo Gnarls Barkley. Interestingly, Jay-Z says that he made *The Black Album* hoping that amateurs would remix it. A remix that blends not only cultural styles but also cultural judgements is ‘Raging Fred’, a mash-up of the highly esteemed Scorcese film *Raging Bull* with the pop culture TV show *The Flintstones*. In both cases boundaries are blurred in ways that have been called postmodern.

---

**What is meant by:**

- (a) high culture;
- (b) low culture; and
- (c) popular culture?

**What is meant by the phrase ‘the distinction between high and low culture is no longer viable’?**

Discuss your work with other people.

---

**Bricolage and intertextuality**

Postmodern culture is marked by an historical blurring – that is, representations of the past and present are displayed together in a bricolage. Bricolage involves the rearrangement and juxtaposition of previously unconnected signs to produce new codes of meaning. Bricolage as a cultural style is a core element of postmodern culture. It is observable in architecture, film and popular music video. Shopping centres have made the mixing of styles from different times and places a particular ‘trademark’. Likewise, MTV is noted for their blending of pop music from a variety of periods and locations. There has also been a notable collapse or blurring of genre boundaries within cultural products. The film *Blade Runner* is frequently cited as a movie that mixes the genres of noir, horror, sci-fi, etc. In a more contemporary vein, the films *Shrek* and the TV series *The Sopranos* and *Da Ali G Show* illustrate aspects of genre deconstruction. Further, they are double-coded (Jencks, 1986), allowing them to be understood both by the literati and by a popular audience.

Postmodern culture is marked by a self-conscious intertextuality, that is, the citation of one text within another. This involves explicit allusions to particular programmes and oblique references to other genre conventions and styles; for example, references to the
film *Thelma and Louise* and the reworking of noir conventions or those of the ‘road movie’ in *Pulp Fiction* and *True Romance*. This intertextuality is an aspect of enlarged cultural self-consciousness about the history and functions of cultural products.

**The aestheticization of everyday life**

The blurring of cultural boundaries, allied to the prominence of the image, have arguably resulted in an aestheticization of urban life. Featherstone (1991) suggests that this takes three critical forms:

1. artistic subcultures which seek to efface the boundaries between art and everyday life;
2. the project of turning life into a work of art;
3. the flow of signs and images that saturate the fabric of everyday life.

Identity projects and the aestheticization of daily life are linked together within consumer culture through the creation of lifestyles centred on the consumption of aesthetic objects and signs. This is linked to a relative shift in importance in society from production to consumption linked with post-Fordism.

**Postmodern aesthetics in television**

- Television is at the heart of image production, and the circulation of a collage of stitched-together images that is core to postmodern cultural style.

The juxtaposition of images and meanings in television creates an electronic bricolage in which unexpected associations can occur. This is an outcome of the flow of a given channel and a reflection of multi-channel diversity. The ability of viewers to zip and zap, channel-change and fast-forward constitutes a bricolage or ‘strip text’ (Newcombe, 1988). Here, adopting the ‘appropriate’ reading attitudes and competencies is itself an aspect of postmodern culture.

Stylistically, the markers of the postmodern have been seen as:

- aesthetic self-consciousness;
- self-reflexiveness;
- juxtaposition/montage;
- paradox;
- ambiguity;
- the blurring of the boundaries of genre, style and history.
Postmodernism in the arts is seen as a reaction against modernism. However, postmodern television takes on and makes popular modernist techniques, including montage, rapid cutting, non-linear narrative techniques and the decontextualization of images.

**Postmodern detectives and gangsters**

The American TV ‘detective’ series *Twin Peaks* and *Miami Vice* are widely regarded as indicative of postmodern style. *Twin Peaks* was ‘double-coded’ in the commonly understood manner of postmodern texts. It involved a combination of codes which enabled it to engage with a ‘concerned minority’ familiar with an ‘expert’ language and a wider popular audience. *Twin Peaks* was postmodern in its multigeneric form, whereby the conventions of the police series, science fiction and soap opera were blended together in a way that was sometimes to be taken seriously and at other times regarded as humorous ambivalent parody (Collins, 1992). For Kellner (1992), *Miami Vice* was postmodern in two fundamental ways:

1. its aesthetic style, by which the lighting, camera work, rock music, bright colours and exotic terrain led to intense aesthetic spectacles;
2. its polysemic nature, involving shifting and conflicting identities, meanings and ideologies.

More recently, the TV series *The Sopranos* has played with the conventions of the gangster genre. In particular, it has ‘cited’ movies about the Mafia, including *Goodfellas* and *The Godfather*. Further, the whole drama is shot through with irony, a postmodern marker *par excellence*. This is achieved most obviously by having the central ‘Godfather’ figure visit a psychiatrist (a critical figure in the postmodern landscape).

**The cartoon postmodern**

*The Simpsons* has made a ‘dysfunctional’ American family the ironic heroes of a series that is double-coded in its appeal to children and adults. It is both entertainment and a subtle reflection on American cultural life. In accordance with contemporary postmodern culture, the television set is at the heart of the Simpsons’ life and its audience. The programme requires us to have a self-conscious awareness of other television and film genres as it makes a range of intertextual references. For example, *Itchy and Scratchy*, the Simpson children’s favourite cartoon, parodies *Tom and Jerry*. It mocks the double standard by which television violence is simultaneously condemned and enjoyed.

The postmodern markers of ambivalence, irony and intertextuality are equally evident in the popular show *South Park*, which parodies a series of cultural stereotypes. We are presented with a range of small-minded racist and sexist characters in conjunction with a series of stereotypes of race, gender, age, body size, etc. Yet the show manages to undermine
the stereotypes by making us laugh at them. The representation of the African-American chef as a sexy black soul singer, the Barry White of *South Park*, parodies the ‘original’ image as itself a stereotype. This is given an added intertextual dimension and ironic twist by the voice of Isaac Hayes, known for the theme song to the blaxploitation movie *Shaft*. The show walks a line between offending everyone and undermining the offence. It takes nothing seriously while making serious statements about, for example, the use of television as a child-minder.

---

**Watch an episode of The Simpsons or South Park.**

- In what ways do they illustrate a multi-genre form and intertextuality?
- What genres are involved?
- How are they juxtaposed to each other?
- How do they employ irony and parody?

In a group of three or four, prepare a written and oral presentation for a new multi-genre film or TV series that you are going to ‘pitch’ to a film or TV company.

---

**Culture jamming**

In recent times a new form of postmodern ‘politics of representation’ has emerged called ‘culture jamming’ (or guerrilla semiotics). The strategy has roots in the ‘situationist’ movement of the 1960s, but came to prominence with Dery’s widely circulated (1993) book *Culture Jamming* and Klein’s (2001) *No Logo*. Culture jamming is the practice of subverting mass media messages, especially advertising, through artistic satire. Culture jams seek to resist consumerism by refiguring logos, fashion statements and product images in order to raise concerns about consumption, environmental damage and inequitable social practices.

Culture jamming aims to disrupt an instrumental ‘technoculture’ that generates consent through the use of symbols (Rheingold, 1994). It draws upon semiotic and postmodern theory to work within the systems it intends to subvert. Culture jamming does this by employing bricolage strategies of ‘taking pre-existing textual fragments and modifying them so that they convey a meaning quite different than their originally intended one’ (Tietzen, 2001: 114–15). ‘Jammers’ attempt to subvert the semiotics of the media by transforming ‘the message’ into its own ‘anti-message’. Its supporters suggest that successful contemporary media activism resists less through simple opposition and more by using commercial rhetoric against itself, often through exaggeration (Harold, 2004).

In 1989, a group playfully called the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO) purchased hundreds of Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls just before Christmas. They then swapped the dolls’ computer chip voice boxes and returned the dolls to toy stores to be resold. When children
opened their toys on Christmas morning, ‘instead of Barbie chirping cheerful affirmations of American girlishness she growled, in the butch voice of G.I. Joe: “Eat lead, Cobra!” “Dead men tell no lies!” and “Vengeance is mine!” Meanwhile, Joe exclaimed: “Let’s plan our dream wedding”’ (Harold, 2004: 198). The aim was to bring attention to the gender-based stereotyping in children’s toys by reversing cultural norms.

Subverting adverts

Another example of culture jamming concerned the defacement of an advertising billboard for Berlei underwear in Sydney, Australia. The advert contained an image of a woman wearing only underwear preparing to be cut in half by a magician. Five women were charged with property damage after they added the words; ‘Even if you’re mutilated you’ll always feel good in Berlei’, to the advertising caption. The charges against the women were upheld in court but the magistrate dismissed the case without sentence or damages. Indeed, she supported the women’s case that the advertisement was offensive. The public debate that followed the case raised issues about the representation of women and the level of cultural tolerance of male violence against women.

Culture jamming raises again the question of whether it is possible to subvert the ideologies and aesthetics of consumer culture from within. Certainly ‘jamming’ runs counter to the Frankfurt School argument that any mass-produced aesthetic is complicit in reproducing the system, even when it attempts to deploy alternative discourses (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979). Today some critics suggest that culture jammers have themselves become just another product. Adbusters, for example, the Canadian organization devoted to ad parodies and anti-corporate analysis, now markets a line of anti-consumer products including posters, videos, postcards and T-shirts. It also has advertising slots on the television programmes USA Today and MTV. In addition it has launched an ambitious anti-branding campaign with an advert offering its ‘blackspot’ sneaker, an ethically produced alternative to the Nike swoosh (Harold, 2004).

Campaigns such as these have drawn criticism that organizations such as Adbusters have become merely another part of the commercial machine: ‘It’s become an advertisement for anti-advertising’ (Klein, 1997: 42). Indeed, Klein (2001) points out that advertisers themselves have used progressive political themes as a way of promoting their products. For example, calls to celebrate diversity and more fully represent women and ethnic minorities have been accommodated by corporations such as Benetton who use it for ‘hip’ niche marketing. It is a moot point then whether consumers can distinguish between advertisements and transgressive attempts to subvert them, or whether they simply experience one depthless culture.

Evaluating postmodern culture

The significance of postmodern culture has been hotly debated. For some critics, contemporary culture is depthless and meaningless. However, for other writers, present-day culture is to be welcomed as popular and transgressive.
**Depthless culture**

For Baudrillard, postmodern culture is constituted through a continual flow of images that establishes no connotational hierarchy. Postmodern culture is argued to be flat and one-dimensional; it is literally and metaphorically ‘superficial’. In this vein, Grossberg describes *Miami Vice* as ‘all on the surface. And that surface is nothing but a collection of quotations from our own collective historical debris, a mobile game of trivia’ (1987: 29). Here is a culture in which no objects have an ‘essential’ or ‘deep’ value. Rather, value is determined through the exchange of symbolic meanings – that is, commodities have sign values that confer prestige and signify social value, status and power. A commodity is not simply an object with use value but a commodity-sign. Signs are said to be able to ‘float free’ from objects. Consequently, signs can be used in a variety of associations (as illustrated every day in television advertising). As Featherstone suggests, ‘consumption … must not be understood as the consumption of use-values, a material utility, but primarily as the consumption of signs’ (1991: 85).

**Implosions and simulations**

Baudrillard’s world is one in which a series of modern distinctions have broken down (sucked into a ‘black hole’, as he calls it). This process collapses the real and the unreal, the public and the private, art and reality. For Baudrillard, postmodern culture is marked by an all-encompassing flow of fascinating simulations and images. He calls this a hyperreality, in which we are overloaded with images and information:

> It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist. … it is quotidian reality in its entirety – political, social, historical and economic – that from now on incorporates the simulating dimension of hyperrealism. We live everywhere in an ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality. (Baudrillard, 1983a: 148)

The prefix ‘hyper’ signifies ‘more real than real’. The real is produced according to a model that is not a given but artificially reproduced as real, a real retouched in an ‘hallucinatory resemblance’ with itself. The real implodes on itself. Implosion in Baudrillard’s work describes a process leading to the collapse of boundaries between the real and simulations. This includes the frontier between the media and the social, so that ‘TV is the world’. Television simulates real-life situations, not so much to represent the world, but to execute its own. News re-enactments of ‘real-life’ events blur the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the simulation, ‘entertainment’ and ‘current affairs’.

According to Baudrillard, the postmodern world of communication saturation represents an over-intense advance of the world upon consciousness. The subjects of this process he describes as ‘schizophrenic’. There is an over-exposure or explosion of visibility by which all becomes transparency and immediate visibility, which Baudrillard calls ‘obscenity’. The television screen is the central metaphor. Here the schizoid subject of ‘obscenity’
becomes ‘a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence’ (Baudrillard, 1983b: 148).

**KEY THINKERS**

**Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)**

French theorist Jean Baudrillard critiques structuralism and Marxism to develop his own theories of postmodernism. His key idea is that a commodity is not simply an object with use-value for exchange but also a commodity-sign. For Baudrillard, postmodern culture is constituted through a continual flow of images that is one-dimensional and ‘superficial’. He argues that a series of modern distinctions, including the real and the unreal, the public and the private, art and reality, have broken down, leading to a culture of simulacrum and hyperreality.


**The cultural style of late capitalism**

For Fredric Jameson (1984), who draws on the work of Baudrillard, postmodernism is implicated in a depthless sense of the present and a loss of historical understanding. We live in a postmodern hyperspace in which we are unable to place ourselves, the specific manifestations of which include:

- the cannibalization of styles from past and present;
- the loss of authentic artistic style in favour of pastiche;
- the breakdown of a firm distinction between high and low culture;
- the culture of the simulacrum or copy (for which no original existed);
- the fashion for nostalgia in which history is the object not of representation but of stylistic connotation;
- the transcending of the capacities of the individual to locate him- or herself perceptually or cognitively in a postmodern hyperspace.
Jameson describes the postmodern world as marked by fragmentation, instability and disorientation. This is a view that has much in common with that of Baudrillard. However, he parts company on the level of explanation. Jameson is at pains to point out that postmodernism has a genuine historical reality. He argues that postmodern cultural practices are not superficial but expressive of developments and experiences in a deep ‘reality’. For Jameson, postmodernism is expressive of a world system of multinational or late capitalism. It represents the cultural style of late capitalism operating in a new global space. Late capitalism extends commodification to all realms of personal and social life, transforming the real into the image and simulacrum.

© Photographer: Pryzmat | Agency: Dreamstime.com

To what extent does the shopping mall now represent the public space of postmodern culture?

What are the features of shopping malls that Jameson would describe as ‘postmodern hyperspace’?
Transgressive postmodernism

In contrast to the negative evaluations of Baudrillard and Jameson, Kaplan (1987) claims a transgressive and progressive role for postmodern culture and its collapsing of boundaries. She argues that the postmodern music video offers, in a deconstructionist mode, no assured narrative position for the viewer, undermining the status of representation as real or true. This parallels Hutcheon’s (1989) argument that postmodernism makes the whole idea of representation problematic, even as it is complicit with it. She suggests that postmodernism ‘takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something with inverted commas around what is being said’ (1989: 1).

Postmodernism is marked by an ironic knowingness because it explores the limitations and conditions of its own knowing.

Collins (1992) argues that postmodernism acknowledges multiple subject positions and identities. Further, it actively encourages a conscious moving in and out of readership positions which includes playing with meaning and form. For Collins, Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism as ‘camp’ recycling, pastiche and a loss of historical depth ‘fails to account for the diversity of possible strategies of re-articulation’. These range from simple revivalism and nostalgia to ‘the radicalized cover versions of pop standards by the Sex Pistols or The Clash, in which the past is not just accessed but “hijacked”, given an entirely different cultural significance’ (Collins, 1992: 333).

Chambers (1987, 1990) argues that rather than being the core of a ‘depthless culture’, commodity-signs are the raw material by which active and meaning-oriented consumers construct multiple identities. Here, consumers are self-conscious bricoleurs selecting elements of material commodities and meaningful signs and arranging them into a personal style. Thus, the postmodern can be read as the democratization of culture and of new individual and political possibilities. Other writers point to the potential of subverting the meaning of signs in consumer culture to enact a form of cultural resistance, for example, through the strategy of culture jamming (above).

Deconstruct this: Modernism vs. Postmodernism

- What is modernism? What is postmodernism?
- What features of the modern are in the postmodern?
- What features of the postmodern are in the modern?
Modernity and postmodernity are periodizing concepts that refer to historical epochs. They are abstractions which broadly define the institutional parameters of social formations. In this sense, modernity is marked by the post-medieval rise of industrial capitalism and the nation-state system. These institutions of modernity are associated with the social and cultural processes of individualization, differentiation, commodification, urbanization, rationalization, bureaucratization and surveillance.

Modernism and postmodernism are cultural and epistemological concepts. As cultural concepts, they concern the experience of day-to-day living and artistic styles/movements. However, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is less than clear. For example, it was argued that the experience of living within modernity involves pace, change, ambiguity, risk, doubt and the chronic revision of knowledge. Yet a sense of a fragmentary, ambiguous and uncertain world involving high levels of reflexivity is also a marker of postmodern culture. The stress on contingency, irony and the blurring of cultural boundaries is more obviously a marker of the postmodern. Modernism as an artistic movement and philosophy upholds the high–popular distinction in a way that postmodernism does not. At its outer edge, postmodern theorists point to the collapse of the modern distinction between the real and simulations.

As a set of philosophical and epistemological concerns, modernism is associated with the enlightenment philosophy of rationality, science, universal truth and progress. In contrast, postmodern philosophy has been associated with a questioning of these categories. For example:

- not depth but surface;
- not truth but truths;
- not objectivity but solidarity or social commendation (Rorty);
- not foundationalism but historically specific ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault).

However, while Lyotard calls these philosophical positions postmodern, Foucault questioned the need to be either for or against the enlightenment. Rorty has regretted using the term ‘postmodern’ (since the post-enlightenment philosophy he espouses can be traced back at least as far as Nietzsche), while Giddens argues that postmodern culture is an expression of ‘radicalized modernity’.

Disagreements and debates centre on whether we should describe the features of contemporary life as modernity or postmodernity. Are the artistic projects of modernism and postmodernism worlds apart, or do they share features? Is it valuable to describe the prevailing culture as postmodern? Many writers regard the questioning of philosophical foundations of modernity as pointing to the democratic acceptance of difference and the reflexive ability to create ourselves. However, others have viewed it with trepidation.

(Continued)
They have feared the inability to ground cultural politics, seeing postmodernism as a form of irrationalism that opens the door to the unfettered imposition of power. Likewise, some writers see consumer capitalism as releasing the possibility for creative play and identity construction. Other critics regard it as furthering the domination of global corporate power.