

## MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM: AN OVERVIEW WITH ART EXAMPLES

Terry Barrett

Modernism and postmodernism in art are best understood in relation to modernity and postmodernity in general cultural history; and modernist and postmodernist art are most easily understood with art examples. The following offers cursory explanations of central themes in modernity and postmodernity, and modernist art and postmodernist art with descriptions of artworks that make the themes more understandable. The art examples are set in italics.

### Modernity and Postmodernity

The Age of Modernity is the epoch that began with the Enlightenment (about 1687 to 1789). Isaac Newton championed the belief that through science the world could be saved. René Descartes (1596-1650) and later, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), shaped the age intellectually by their beliefs that through reason they could establish a foundation of universal truths. Political leaders of modernity also championed reason as the source of progress in social change, believing that with reason they could produce a just and egalitarian social order. Such beliefs fed the American and French democratic revolutions, the first and second World Wars, and the thinking of many today. The major movements and events of modernity are democracy, capitalism, industrialization, science, and urbanization. The rallying flags of modernity are freedom and the individual.

There is no unified theory of postmodernity. There are many contenders putting forth contentious ideas. Proponents of postmodernity symbolically date its birth with the riots in Paris in May 1968, when students, with the support of prominent scholars, demanded radical changes in a rigid, closed, and elitist European university system. Postmodernism does not merely chronologically follow modernism, it reacts against modernism, and might better be called anti-modernism.

Postmodernists criticize modernity by citing the suffering and misery of peasants under monarchies, and later the oppression of workers under capitalist industrialization, the exclusion of women from the public sphere, the colonization of other lands by imperialists and, ultimately, the destruction of indigenous peoples. Postmodernists claim that modernity leads to social practices and institutions that legitimate domination and control by a powerful few over the many, even though modernists promise equality and liberation of all people.

*Fred Wilson's exhibition "Mining the Museum" at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992, offers several postmodernist artistic strategies that address with critical bite social power in modernity. Among finely crafted and polished silver vessels that one would expect to see in a section of an historical museum labeled "Metalwork 1830-1880," Wilson placed steel shackles crudely forged and hammered for slaves. In a typical display of antique Victorian furniture, including a chair with the logo of the Baltimore Equitable Society, Wilson placed a whipping post. Based on Wilson's exhibition, museum educators prepared materials that asked visitors to consider any object in the museum by asking these questions, none of which would have been asked of an art object during the reign of modernism: For whom was it created? For whom does it exist? Who is represented? Who is doing the telling? The hearing?*

Whereas modernity is influenced by the rationalism of Newton, Descartes, Kant, and others, postmodernity is influenced by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, and more recently, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty, who are skeptical about the modernist belief that theory can mirror reality. Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud also undermined the modernist belief that reason is the source of truth by identifying economic forces above the surface of society and psychological forces below it that are not bound by reason, yet are powerful shapers of society and individuals. Postmodernists embrace a more cautious and limited perspective on truth and knowledge than modernists. Postmodernists stress that facts are simply interpretations, that truth is not absolute but merely the construct of individual groups, and that all knowledge is mediated by culture and language.

*In a New York City gallery installation in 1994, postmodern artist Barbara Kruger offered an angry critique of how she understands religions to use cultural practices and language to control the psyche and society. In wall texts, photo graphics on the walls and the skylight and floor, and over loud speakers in the Mary Boone Gallery, Kruger made statements including these: "Think like us." "Believe like us." "Pray like us." "I mutilate you so you won't feel any pleasure. I want you to have my babies, because it shows how powerful and manly I am, and you want to do it because that is all you're good for."*

Structuralism and poststructuralism are two competing intellectual movements formative of postmodern thought. Structuralism emerged in France after World War II,

heavily influenced by the earlier semiotic theory of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. De Saussure identified language as a system of signs consisting of signifiers (words) and signified (concepts) that are arbitrarily linked to each other in a way that is designated by a culture.

Claude Lévi-Strauss applied linguistic analysis to anthropology. Postmodernists build on the semiotic projects of Roland Barthes and others undertook semiotic projects studying the systems of signs in societies, believing that language, signs, images, and signifying systems organize the psyche, society, and everyday life.

Structuralists in various disciplines, including literature, attempted to explain phenomena by identifying hidden systems. They sought to discover unconscious codes or rules that underlie phenomena and to make visible systems that were previously invisible. They especially differed from previous scholars who explained things through historical sequences of events rather than the structuralist method of explaining phenomena in relation to other synchronous phenomena. Structuralists, like modernists, believed they could with rigor attain coherence and objectivity, and they claimed scientific status for their theories, which they believed purged mere subjective understandings.

Poststructuralists, most influentially Jacques Derrida, criticize structuralists for their scientific pretensions, their search for universal truth, and their belief in an unchanging human nature. Both structuralists and poststructuralists reject the idea of the autonomous subject, insisting that no one can live outside of history, and poststructuralists especially emphasize the arbitrariness of signs. Postmodernists stress that language, culture, and society are arbitrary and conventionally agreed upon and should not be considered natural. Whereas modernists believe they can discover unified and coherent foundations of truth that are universally true and applicable, postmodernists accept the limitations of multiple views, fragmentation, and indeterminacy.

*Postmodern painter David Salle challenges closed meaning systems to expose their arbitrary construction by juxtaposing many diverse subjects on single canvases—for example, matadors, pop-culture images of Santa Claus and Donald Duck, iconic profiles of Abraham Lincoln and Christopher Columbus, with portions of nude and partially clothed female bodies. Some art critics decry Salle's pastiche paintings as sexist because of "their trademark girlie pinup images" (Rimanelli, 1991, p. 111) and his "crotch intensive perspective" (Cottingham, 1988, p. 104). However, with a postmodernist perspective that depends on the distinction between sign and meaning, Robert Storr (1988) denies that Salle's paintings represent women even though they depict them. Storr asserts contempt "for anyone who would insist that the subject represented might in some way have a proprietary interest in their representation" (p. 24).*

Postmodernist psychology also rejects the modernist notion that the individual is a unified rational being. Descartes's dictum, "I think, therefore I am," and Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum that "existence precedes essence" which defines the individual as free and undetermined, place the individual at the center of the universe. Postmodernists instead decenter the individual and claim that the self is merely an effect of language, social relations, and the unconscious; they downplay the ability of the individual to effect change or to be creative.

*Much of Cindy Sherman's art is photographs of herself which undermine notions of individuality. In "Untitled Film Stills," 1977-1980, she pictures herself, but as a woman in a wide variety of guises from hitchhiker to housewife. These pictures look like stills from old movies. They are pictures of Cindy Sherman, and pictures of Cindy Sherman disguised as others, and they are also pictures of women as women are represented in cultural artifacts such as movies and magazines and paintings, and especially as pictured by male producers, directors, editors, painters, and photographers. They are about "the cultural construction of femininity" (Heartney, 1987, p. 18).*

### Modernist Aesthetics and Criticism

Artistic modernism is more recent than philosophical modernity. Art critic Robert Atkins (1993) dates modernism "roughly from the 1860s through the 1970s" and writes that the term is used to identify both the styles and the ideologies of the art produced during those years (p. 139). Although modernism is now old, and some think finished, it was once very progressive, bringing a new art for a new age.

Modernism emerged amidst the social and political revolution sweeping Europe. Western European culture was becoming more urban and less rural, industrial rather than agrarian. The importance of organized religion in the daily lives of people was diminishing while secularism was expanding. Because the old system of artistic patronage had ended, artists were free to choose their own content. Their art no longer needed to glorify the wealthy individuals and powerful institutions of church and state that had previously commissioned their paintings and sculptures. Because it was not likely that their art would flourish in the new capitalist art market, artists felt free to experiment and made highly personal art. The slogan of the era, "Art for the sake of art," is apt.

Modernists signified their allegiance to the new by referring to themselves as "avant-garde," thinking they were ahead of their time and beyond historical limitations. Modern artists were especially rebellious against restrictions put on previous artists by the art academies of the 1700s, and later artists rebelled against the dominance of the art salons and their conservative juries in the late 1800s. Modern artists were often critical of the status quo and frequently challenged middle class values.

*Premodernists Jacques Louis David painted scenes from the French Revolution, and Francisco de Goya depicted Napoleon's invasion of Spain. Modernists Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet turned their easels away from nobility and wealth to paint ordinary life around them. The impressionists and postimpressionists abandoned historical subject matter, and also turned away from the realism and illusionism artists had been refining in the West since the Renaissance. Some modernists, such as the futurists in Italy during the 1920s, celebrated in their work new technology, especially speed, while others, such as the constructivists in the Soviet Union, embraced scientific models of thinking. Abstractionists Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian embraced spiritualism to offset the secularism of modern society. Paul Gauguin, and later Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse sought solace and inspiration in non-Western cultures, while Paul Klee and Joan Miró "employed childlike imagery that embodies the yearning to escape adulthood and all its responsibility" (Atkins, 1993, p. 176).*

In 1770, Immanuel Kant laid the philosophic foundation for artistic modernism. Kant developed a theory of aesthetic response which held that viewers could and should arrive at similar interpretations and judgments of an artwork if they experienced the work in and of itself. When viewing art, according to Kant, people should put themselves in a supra state of sensory awareness, give up their personal interests and associational responses, and consider art independently of any purpose or utility other than the aesthetic. An aesthetic judgment should be neither personal nor relative. The viewer should rise above the time, place, and personal idiosyncrasies, reaching aesthetic judgments of art with which all reasonable people would agree. In 1913, Edward Bullough, an aesthetician, added the concept of "psychic distancing," reinforcing Kant's idea that the viewer should contemplate a work of art with detachment.

In the 1920s, modernist art theory received a big boost from two British critics, Clive Bell and Roger Fry, who introduced what is now known as formalism. Formalism and modernism are inextricably linked, although the former is an outgrowth of the latter. Bell and Fry sought to ignore as irrelevant the artist's intent in making a work of art and any social or ideological function the artist may have wanted the work to have. Instead, the "significant form" of the artwork was what was to be exclusively attended to. Atkins (1990) credits Bell and Fry's critical purpose as being responsible in part for the early 20th century interest in Japanese prints and Oceanic and African artifacts. Their critical method of attending to art was meant to allow a cross-cultural interpretation and evaluation of any art from any place or any time. Form was paramount, and attention to the other aspects of the work—such as its subject matter or narrative content or uses in rituals or references to the ordinary world—were considered distractions and, worse, detriments to a proper consideration of art.

During the 1930s, in the area of literary criticism, T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and other writers developed "New Criticism," a formalist approach to literature that paralleled formalism in art. These literature critics wanted more interpretive emphasis on

