Post Modernism and Mass Culture

Media Images Encourage superficiality rather than substance, cynicism rather than belief, the thirst for constant change rather than security of stable traditions, the desires of the moment rather than the truths of history.
Strinati, 1992

The Gulf War did not take place. The media presented or hyped, as The Gulf War was a code in itself – pro-western, xenophobic, technocratic, and visually and verbally selective.
Baudrillard. 1991

Postmodernism tries to come to terms with and understand a media-saturated society. The mass media, for example, were once thought of as holding up a mirror to, and thereby reflecting, a wider social reality. Now that reality is only definable in terms of surface reflection of the mirror.
Strinati, 1992

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact it is the social in its entirety, in all its banal omnipresence, which is carceal). Disneyland is presented as imaginary, in order to make us believe that the rest is 'real', when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyper-real and of simulation. It is no longer a question of questioning a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.
Baudrillard, 1993

Eclecticism is the degree of contemporary general culture; one listens to reggae, watches Westerns, eats MacDonald's for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothing in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games.
Lyotard, 1993

This is a relatively **new development** and there are **few sources** that present clear and readable accounts of it. It is a reaction to the belief of postmodernists that Marx concentrated excessively on production, at the cost of consumption.

Introduction

This concept, despite its variety of meanings and definitions, is used to refer to **many aspects of social life** from musical forms and styles, literature and fine art through to philosophy, history and especially the mass media. Post modernism is a slippery term that is used by writers to refer to several different things. **Featherstone (1991)** points out the term has been used to refer to …

1. New developments in intellectual and cultural theory
2. The suggestion that our subjective experience of everyday life and our sense of identity has somehow changed significantly in recent years.
3. The view that capitalist or industrial societies have reached new and important stages in their development, the shift from modernity to post-modernity.

Jean Baudrillard

Post Modern sociologies contain the observation that in **post-modernity**, as opposed to **modernity**, **we witness the decline of absolute truth** and the rise of relativism, see my notes on this **– where no single dominant meanings can be widely agreed on in society** regarding the nature of social life. When asked in an interview to define post-modernism **Jean Baudrillard** commented….

There is no clear or appropriate answer to that. Basically, if post-modernism exists, it must be the characteristic of a universe where there is no more definitions possible. It is a game of definitions which matters…they have been deconstructed, destroyed…it has all be done. The extreme limit of these possibilities has been reached…all that are left are the pieces.   **Baudrillard, 1993**

In this essay *Simulations* he attempts to explain the differences between '**reality'** as lived by individuals in their day-to-day life, and the so-called *reality* portrayed by the media. **Baudrillard**, like other post modernists, contends that **everyday reality** and **media have become blurred**. Individuals obtain what they experience **as real knowledge about the real world from the media**, but this is actually **reproduced knowledge about an entirely simulated or reproduced world**. This he calls the *hyper real*. Moreover, Baudrillard views consumption not only as merely economic and material activity but also a symbolic and meaningful and status differentiating activity. To give an example
, *Coke* at a conscious level are recommending a drink, at a secondary level, they are recommending that the drink may be fun, acceptance, romance, or whatever, and at a more general level, reinforce the belief that such consumption is 'good'. The whole package is '*the real thing'*. In fact, *Coke* is mainly coloured sweetened water and largely market researchers create the values associated with it.
Umberto Eco (1987) an Italian most modernist philosopher and literary figure, defines the hyperreal as *that which is more real than real.*

In using the concept of the hyperreal, some post modernists claim that increased importance of the media in contemporary society, the nature of relationships between the media and audiences is changing. Baudrillard claims that **audiences, especially of TV,** have undergone rapid and **profound change in their experiences**.

Audiences live their real lives through simulations of reality given by the media. Thus the knowledge and experience social actors believer they have of '**real life'** becomes **indistinguishable from that given to us by the media.** An example of this was the 'instant' 24-hour images of warfare produced by CNN from the Gulf War. Audiences felt that they had experienced the war themselves, yet they only did so through manufactured TV images.

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Lyotard

According to Lyotard, the post modern world is characterised by a **spreading cynicism** about '**metranarratives'** or general belief systems, including world religions, political ideologies such as Socialism or Liberalism, and even science and reason. We have become disillusioned and no longer expect the world to become a better place. Metranarratives **have partly been discredited** because, **in an era of global media** in which we learn more and more about other peoples' beliefs and lifestyles, **it becomes less and less possible to regard one lifestyle or one belief system as the 'true one'.**

Dominic Strinati

Strinati suggests that, post-modern TV and film become preoccupied merely with **surface style and imagery**, **rather than deeper underlying themes, which might relate to the 'realities' of the human condition**. Action blockbuster movies dwell **on special effects, rather than strong plots** and TV drama departs from realist plots of the 1960's (which attempted to look at serious issues such as homelessness, *Cathy Come Home* and embraces a surreal world in which 'reality' is often confused; For example, *Twin Peaks,* or more recently *The X Files* and *American Gothic.* Kaplan (1987) identified pop and rock videos as perfect examples of post modernist culture because they abandon all notion of narrative structure – there is no attempt to 'tell a story', rather the power of the rock video lies purely in the collage of images mixed with music.

What is Post Modernism? Why is it Relevant to Us?

In order to identify post-modernism, the following, by no means exhaustive, set of summary points **summarises** some of the most **salient features** which writers about the phenomenon have chosen to emphasise.

Trowler, 1996 identifies two key themes that can be associated with postmodernism.

1. Is that of a Society that has come after modern societies, which is information rich, global and composed of many, *sub-groups and cultures.*
2. The second theme sees postmodernism as a 'way of knowing the world, one which questions the **nature of 'truth'**, 'reason' and even 'reality'. This is as I have already said, a **relativist position**, which **denies that there are absolutes in any area of human knowledge**. Following the phenomenological tradition in sociology, knowledge is socially constructed and reflects the social positions of the informer and informed.

- ✓ If society is information rich, the **majority of information comes from the media**.
- ✓ The media is a **key factor in the spread of 'global ideas'** and information. Critics point to the USA as the main producer, which has in turn led to a form of cultural imperialism in the late 20th C. For example, **Ritzer** talks of the *McDonaldization* of society.
- ✓
- ✓ **A response to the bewildering array of choice and diversity is to 'pick and mix' to suit sub-group** and **sub-cultural identities**. So young, Japanese people may drive, 1950's American Cars, dance in the part to early rock and roll music and have elaborate Elvis, quiff hairstyles, while at the same time adhering to Japanese ideas of culture and style.
- ✓ The media contribute to our knowledge of the world. More recent sociological approaches stress sees **knowledge imparted by the media as fragmented, confused and overwhelming**, stressing its relative nature. So a tabloid paper like *The Sun* can have a lead article attacking the role of porn in the aftermath of a brutal sex crime, opposite a 'page three lovely' barring all!

The Cultural Significance of Post Modernism

According to **Jameson and Baudrillard**, with the decline of engineering and manufacturing in many advanced capitalist economies, the provision of the cultural and media services becomes a key economic sector. In the UK for example, the record industry is one of the leading export sectors of the economy.

Both writers argue that Marx has failed to **appreciate the qualitative transformation**, which occurs once **cultural artefacts; signs and images become the most important commodities in the market**. Jameson does not abandon Marx altogether; he acknowledges **that it is still the drive for profit**, which leads capitalism to invest in marketing, advertising and public relations and the other cultural or image industries.

Baudrillard, in contrast, **moves such more sharply away from Marx**, insisting that in order to understand the post-modern society we must develop a '**political economy of the sign'** or image. The trading of signs or images, as opposed to things, is now the dominant pattern of market relations and the task must be to explore the codes, which govern such exchanges. **It is semiology rather than economics which holds the key to understanding the principles or 'codes' governing such transactions**, and it is the agencies of signification – advertising agencies, marketing consultancies, PR firms, and the mass media –, which play a crucial role in circulating these codes. For example, the 'designer labels' attached to jeans, shirts and coats all 'mean' something according to the code recognised by most young people.

For **Baudrillard**, we live in a world, which is '**media saturated'**, a world in which we are bombarded by media and advertising messages through multi-channel TV, globalised electronic and cable networks, a profusion of radio stations, newspapers and street billboards. Baudrillard argues that the consequences of this are profound. The 'codes' generated by the agencies of signification become our rules for organising our lives. So powerful are these codes that according to Baudrillard, that we lose the ability to distinguish between reality (for example, the real practical values of a commodity) and its image. Thus for Baudrillard, the

post modern world is dominated by 'simulacra' literally, false or deceptive images, in which we no longer try to distinguish reality from image, the two blur together

Key Areas for Postmodernists

1. The breakdown of the distinction between culture and society.

Post modernism is said to describe the emergence of a **social order** in which the **importance** and **power of the mass media** and popular culture mean they **govern** and **shape** other **forms of social relationship**. The idea is that popular culture signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way **we define ourselves** and the world around us. It tries to come to terms with and understand the media in society. The mass media, for example, were once thought of as **holding up a mirror to**, and **thereby reflecting society,** and thereby reflecting a wider social reality. Now reality can be defined by the **surface reflections of that mirror**. Society has become **subsumed** within the mass media. It is no longer a question of **distortion**, since the term implies that **there is a reality**, outside the surface simulations of the media, which can be distorted, and this is precisely what is at issue according to Post Modernists. Linked to this is the idea that in a post-modern condition that it is **more difficult to distinguish the economy from popular culture**. The realm of consumption - what we buy and what determines what we buy - is **increasingly influenced by popular culture**. Consumption is increasingly bound up with popular culture because popular culture increasingly determines consumption
. For example, we watch more films because of extended ownership of VCR's, while advertising, which makes increasing use of popular cultural references, play a important role in deciding what we buy.

2. An Emphasis On Style at the Expense of Substance:

A crucial implication is that in a post-modern culture, **surfaces and styles** become more **important**, and evoke in turn a kind of 'designer ideology'. Alternatively, as **Harvey** puts it...'images dominate narrative'. The argument is that we increasingly consume **images and signs** for their **own sake** rather than for their '**usefulness'** or for deeper values that they might symbolise. We consume images and signs precisely **because they are images and** signs, and disregard their questions of **usefulness and value**. Consequently, qualities like artistic merit, integrity, seriousness and authenticity, realism, intellectual depth and strong narratives **tend to be undermined**. Moreover, virtual reality computer graphics can allow people to experience various forms of reality second hand. These surface simulations can therefore potentially replace their real life counterparts. (Virtual reality sex for example).
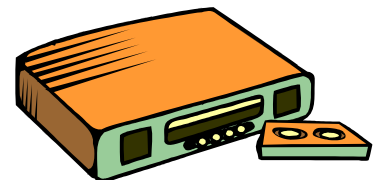
3. The Breakdown of the Distinction between Art and Popular Culture:

If the first two points are accepted it follows that for post-modern culture, **anything can be turned into a joke**, reference or quotation in its eclectic play of styles, simulations and surfaces. If popular cultural signs and media images are taking over in defining our sense of reality for us, and if this means that **style** takes **precedence over content**, then it becomes more difficult to maintain a meaningful distinction between **art and popular culture**. There is no longer any agreed and involvable criteria which can serve to differentiate art from popular culture. Compare this with the fears of mass culture critics that mass culture would eventually subvert high culture. The only difference seems to be that these critics were pessimistic about these developments, whereas, some, but not all-post-modern theorists are by contrast optimistic. One aspect of this process is that art becomes increasingly integrated into the economy both because it is used to encourage people to **consume** though its role in advertising and because it becomes a commercial good in its own right.
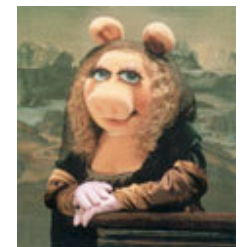
4. Confusions over Time and Space:

It is argued here that **contemporary** and future compression's and focusing on time and space have led to **increasing confusion** and **incoherence** in our sense of **time and space**, in our maps of the places we live, our ideas about the **times** on terms of which we **organise our lives**. The title and narratives of the *Back to the Future* films capture this point well. The growing **immediacy of global space** and **time** resulting from the **dominance of the mass media** means that our previously **unified and coherent ideas about space and time** begin to be **undermined**, and become distorted and confused. Rapid flows of capital, money, information and culture disrupt the linear unities of time, and established distances of geographical space. Because of the speed and scope of modern mass communications, **and the relative ease and rapidity** with which **people and information can travel**, time and space becomes less stable and comprehensible and more confused and incoherent. **Harvey.** Post modernism popular culture is seen to express these confusions and distortions. As such, it is less likely to reflect coherent senses of space or time. Some idea of this argument can be obtained by trying to identify the locations used in some pop videos, the linear narratives of some recent films or the times and spaces crossed in a typical evening of TV viewing...In short, post modern culture is a culture *sans frontieres*, outside history.

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5. The Decline of Metanarratives:

The **loss of a sense of history** as a continuous, linear 'narrative' a clear sequence of events, is indicative or the argument that, in the post-modern world, **meta-narratives are in decline**. This point about the decline of meta-narratives arises out the previous argument I have noted. Meta-narratives, examples of which include, religion, science, art, modernism, and Marxism, **make absolute universal and all-embracing claims to knowledge and truth**. Post modernist theory is highly **sceptical** about these meta-narratives and argues that they are **increasingly open to criticism**. In the post-modern world they are **disintegrating**, their **validity and legitimacy are in decline**. It is becoming harder for people to organise and interpret their lives in the light of meta-narratives of whatever kind. This argument would therefore, include for example, the declining significance of religion. Post modernism has been particularly critical of the meta-narrative or Marxism and its claim of absolute truth, as it has been of any theory, which tries to read a pattern of progress into history. The consequence of this is that post modernism rejects the claims of any theory to absolute knowledge, or of any social practice to universal validity.

Exercise One

Place the following into the categories used by **Strinati**. Then add a few of your own.
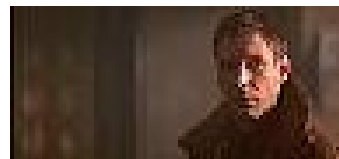
The Mona Lisa by Andy Warhol
Watching The BBC news casts
A Tin of Campbell's Soup

Horoscopes
Lacoste Tops
The Gulf War
Jurassic Park
Rambo
Power Rangers
A Coca Cola Bottle

Blade Runner
Budweiser
Disneyland
Modern day mock Tudor houses.
Miami Vice
Sampling

The collapse of the Soviet Block
Eastenders
Who Framed Roger Rabbit
The Decline of Science

Exercise Two

Match the following concepts to the statements below…

Metanarratives
Moderate Post Modernists
Hyperspace
Post Modernism
Extreme Post Modernism
Decentring Society
Postmodernity

1. This refers to an historical epoch. Most writers see this stage as happening now and succeeding modernity.
2. Is usually taken to refer to cultural movement. These modern products, such as art, film and adverts are seen in some way contrasting with the cultural products of modernity.
3. The work of Baudrillard and Lyotard implies a radical move from society to Post Modern society.
4. Individuals are simply constituted by cultural discourses.
5. Design that makes it very difficult for us to orientate ourselves. For example, in Hotel Bonaventure in Los Angeles, four symmetrical towers containing the rooms surround the hotel lobby.
6. General belief systems, including world religions, political ideologies.
7. The work of Jameson is more conventional rather than seeing a break or disjunction between modernity and post modernity, Jameson sees post modernism and post modernity as simply a feature of advanced capitalist society.

Exercise Three

Isolate the **strengths and criticisms** of Postmodernism

1. **John Lechte** makes the point that hyper-reality might not be so all embracing, as Baudrillard believes. He suggests that the judgmental standards of a modern period – based on science and reason are still significantly in place.
2. His work also points to the way in which signs are symbols are endlessly recycled by contemporary mass media.
3. **Kellner** suggests that there is an overemphasis on the importance of TV technology in determining the way that society develops and ignores the importance of social relationships.
4. It represents one attempt to deal with new developments in culture and experience as we move towards the next millennium.
5. The idea that the mass media takes over 'reality' clearly exaggerates their importance. The mass media are important but not that important. Strinati.
6. We watch TV, where soap opera characters are depicted by the newspapers as real people.
7. We live in a media dominated world. This world is one removed often from reality.
8. It is often the play between the stylish image that is more important than the reality when it comes to TV and the media.
9. The rejection of all **metanarratives** is in itself, another metanarrative.
10. The work merely rehearses the work of the old Frankfurt school's 'manipulation theory'.
11. His work takes a very cynical view of the mass of ordinary people. Studies show that viewers are far from passive and actively interpret messages for themselves.
12. The media is a smooth and clever world of high tech and instant information flows those post-modern heroes and heroines move in.
13. Baudrillard's works is important for focusing on the sphere of consumption rather than production.

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Exercise Four

Complete the following….

Introduction

Many social theorists believe than in the late twentieth century we are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of society, described as **1. …. ……** This change has important implications for the study of culture and identity and media. For example, post-modern theorists claim that boundaries between the cultures are becoming **2. …….**

The term post-modern is difficult to define. **George 3. …….** Suggests that it is useful to distinguish between post-modernity, post modernism and post-modern social theory.

Breakdown of the Distinction between High and Mass Culture
Post-modern culture has been seen to have a number of characteristics, contrasting with modern culture. In modern culture, elite forms of culture such as opera and intellectual art films were produced for the **4. …….. ……** while mass cultural products were produced for the **5. ……**
Post-modern cultural forms blur this boundary, for example, Andy Warhol's, pictures draw on both popular cultural forms (Coke cans and images of Marilyn Monroe) and high cultural forms (images of the Mona Lisa). In music composers such as **6. …. …….**draw on both classical and popular music
forms.

The Breakdown of the Barriers between Genres and Styles
Modern culture was based on distinctive genres, for example, Romance, or detective novels in literature. Similarly, modern culture has developed through distinctive styles, for example, rock and blues. Postmodernist culture breaks down these distinctions. Post modernist cultural products draw on different genres and **7. … … …..** them often creating a collage effect. For example, Hip Hop and house music uses sampling to create new music styles from existing records, often bringing together sounds originating from quite different genres.

Mixing of Time, Space and Narrative.
Modern cultural forms typically tell a story or carry a message. A modern novel or film usually has a plot, which develops over a period of time. Modern artworks often convey a social message. Modern ads, attempt to persuade the consumer to buy a specific product. Post-modern forms abandon the notion of a **8. ……….. ……….** In David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* the central character moves between conventional life in small town USA and an underworld of drugs, violence and sexual perversion. It seems impossible that the two worlds can exist in the same time and space.

This is linked to the point above. In an advert, often the feelings it evokes are what it seeks to associate with the product, rather than telling us much about what the product does. Similarly, in supermarkets the packaging becomes **9. .. ……….** as the products.

Modern cultural forms are seen to represent the real world in some way. Cultural signs relate to what they are signifying.