




POST- MODERNISM

解读后现代主义

Christopher Butler 著
朱刚 秦海花 译



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A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION

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Postmodernism	解读后现代主义
Socrates	众说苏格拉底
The World Trade Organization	权力、政治与 WTO

List of illustrations

- 1 Interior of Westin Bonaventure Hotel by Portman 4
John Portman & Associates
- 2 Ray Federman, *Take It or Leave It : A Novel* (1976) 22
Fiction Collective, New York
- 3 Untitled film still (1977) by Cindy Sherman 54
© Cindy Sherman/Metro Pictures
- 4 Untitled film still (1977) by Cindy Sherman 54
© Cindy Sherman/Metro Pictures
- 5 *Fool's House* (1962) by Jasper Johns 63
© Jasper Johns/VAGA, New York/DACS, London 2002. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York
- 6 *New Hoover Quadraflex* (1981–6) by Jeff Koons 65
© Jeff Koons Productions Inc.
- 7 *SS Amsterdam in Front of Rotterdam* (1966) by Malcolm Morley 77
© Malcolm Morley. Norman and Irma Braman collection. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York
- 8 *Holland Hotel* by Richard Estes 79
© Richard Estes. Marlborough Gallery, New York
- 9 *Early One Morning* (1962) by Anthony Caro 82
© Anthony Caro. Photo © Tate, London 2002
- 10 *An Oak Tree* (1973) by Michael Craig-Martin 83
© Michael Craig-Martin. Australian National Gallery, Canberra
- 11 *Picture for Women* (1979) by Jeff Wall 86
© Jeff Wall. Musée national d'art moderne, Paris. Photo © RMN

- 12 Sainsbury Wing, National Gallery, London (1991) by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates 90
© Martin Charles
- 13 Theatre of Abraxas by Ricardo Bofill 91
© Charles Jencks
- 14 *The Dinner Party* (1979) by Judy Chicago 96
© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2002. Judy Chicago collection. Photo © Donald Woodmann
- 15 *Interior Scroll* (1975) by Carolee Schneeman 98
© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2002. Photo © Anthony McCall
- 16 *Untitled, #228* (1990) by Cindy Sherman 99
© Cindy Sherman/Metro Pictures
- 17 *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)* (1981) by Barbara Kruger 101
© Barbara Kruger. Mary Boone Gallery, New York
- 18 *Her Story* (1984) by Elizabeth Murray 107
© Elizabeth Murray. Pace Wildenstein, New York
- 19 *Grandma and the Frenchman (Identity Crisis)* (1990) by Robert Colescott 108
© Robert Colescott. Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
- 20 *The Imagineers Main Street USA* (1955) Anaheim, California 113
From Ghirardo, *Architecture after Modernism* (1996) © Bettmann/Corbis
- 21 *Odalisk* (1955–8) by Robert Rauschenberg 124
© Robert Rauschenberg/DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2002. Museum Ludwig Köln. Photo © Rheinisches Bildarchiv

Contents

	List of illustrations	vii
1	The rise of postmodernism	1
2	New ways of seeing the world	13
3	Politics and identity	44
4	The culture of postmodernism	62
5	The 'postmodern condition'	110
	References	129
	Further reading	133
	Index	135

目录

图目 IX

第一章 后现代主义的兴起 143

第二章 看待世界的新方式 158

第三章 政治与身份 192

第四章 后现代主义文化 212

第五章 “后现代状况” 265

图目

- 图 1. 波特曼设计的威斯汀·波拿冯契饭店内部：“后现代主义超空间” 147
- 图 2. 摘自雷·费德曼：《要就要，不要拉倒：一部小说》（1976）
带有喜剧色彩的后现代主义小说也最能体现对理论的嘲弄。 168
- 图 3.、图 4. 辛迪·舍曼：《无题电影剧照》（1977）
希区柯克和安东尼奥尼的影片中辛迪·舍曼可能会以这样的形象出现；但事实上她没有出演过这些电影。 203
- 图 5. 贾斯珀·约翰斯：《愚人之家》（1962）
语言、理论、对象和艺术。这是一支画笔吗？ 213
- 图 6. 杰夫·孔斯：《新胡佛四件套》（1981-1986）
博物馆展览的精致艺术也被运用到日常消费品中。 215
- 图 7. 马尔科姆·莫利：《鹿特丹前的“阿姆斯特丹”号汽轮》（1966）
这仅仅是一艘大船，还是关于艺术本质的一个声明？ 230
- 图 8. 理查德·埃斯蒂斯：《荷兰旅馆》
一栋危险的形式精美的建筑，难道是一种现代主义倒退？ 232
- 图 9. 安东尼·卡罗：《一天清晨》（1962）
作品形式精美足以引起观众的思索和愉悦。这里没有提出任何问题。 235
- 图 10. 迈克尔·克雷格-马丁：《一棵橡树》（1973）

有时候一支雪茄就是一支雪茄（引自弗洛伊德）。 236

图 11. 杰夫·沃尔：《女性照片》（1979）
谁在看谁？从哪个角度？为什么？ 240

图 12. 文图里、斯科特·布朗及合伙人事务所设计：伦敦英国国家美术馆塞恩斯伯里翼廊（1991）
一幢新的建筑，却是以往风格的拼贴。是否很有讽刺意味？ 245

图 13. 里卡多·博菲尔设计：巴黎阿卜拉克萨斯剧院在这幢凡尔赛宫的后现代主义翻版建筑中，你同样会觉得很小。是为国王设计的吗？ 246

图 14. 朱迪·芝加哥：《晚宴》（1979）
女权主义研讨会：但是与会者的身份难道就没有被“代表”她们的意象所限制吗？ 250

图 15. 卡罗利·施内曼：《内部卷轴》（1975）
我们用身体写作，但在何种意义上女性写作能同样发自身体本身？

252

图 16. 辛迪·舍曼：《无题，第 228 号》（1990）
演示阉割的威胁：犹滴的故事是否也同样是舍曼的故事？ 253

图 17. 芭芭拉·克鲁格：《无题》（你的凝视击中我的脸颊）（1981）
传递信息的艺术：男性的凝视有多粗暴？ 254

图 18. 伊丽莎白·默里：《她的故事》（1984）
后现代主义身份主题可以和现代主义表现模式相结合吗？ 261

图 19. 罗伯特·科莱斯科特：《祖母和法国人》（身份危机）（1990）
表现个人身份需要强行插入叙事模式、使用现实主义模式吗？ 262

图 20. 迪士尼设计者的《美国大街》（1955），阿纳海姆，加利福尼亚州
这是你生活的大街吗？ 268

图 21. 罗伯特·劳申伯格：《女奴》（1955-1958）
“图像导致相对主义导致怀疑。”那么那只鸡在顶上干吗呢？ 280

Chapter 1

The rise of postmodernism

1

Carl Andre's rectangular pile of bricks, *Equivalent VIII* (1966), annoyed lots of people when shown at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1976. It is a typically postmodernist object. Now re-enshrined in the Tate Modern, it doesn't resemble much in the canon of modernist sculpture. It is not formally complex or expressive, or particularly engaging to look at, indeed it can soon be boring. It is easy to repeat. Lacking any features to sustain interest in itself (except perhaps to Pythagorean number mystics) it inspires us to ask questions about its context rather than its content: 'What is the point of this?', or 'Why is this displayed in a museum?' Some theory about the work has to be brought in to fill the vacuum of interest, and this is also fairly typical. It might inspire the question 'Is it really art, or just a heap of bricks pretending to be art?' But this is not a question that makes much sense in the postmodernist era, in which it seems to be generally accepted that it is *the institution* of the gallery, rather than anything else, which has made it, *de facto*, a 'work of art'. The visual arts just are what museum curators show us, from Picasso to sliced-up cows, and it is up to us to keep up with the ideas surrounding these works.

Many postmodernists (and of course their museum director allies) would like us to entertain such thoughts about the ideas which might surround this 'minimalist' art. A pile of bricks is designedly elementary; it confronts and denies the emotionally expressive

qualities of previous (modernist) art. Like Duchamp's famous *Urinal* or his bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, it tests our intellectual responses and our tolerance of the works that the art gallery can bring to the attention of its public. It makes some essentially critical points, which add up to some quite self-denying assumptions about art. Andre says: 'What I try to find are sets of particles and the rules which combine them in the simplest way', and claims that his equivalents are 'communistic because the form is equally accessible to all men'.

This sculpture, however politically correct it may be interpreted to be, isn't nearly as *enjoyable* as Rodin's *Kiss*, or the far more intricate abstract structures of a sculptor like Anthony Caro. Andre's theoretical avant-gardism, which tests our intellectual responses, suggests that the pleasures taken in earlier art are a bit suspect. Puritanism, 'calling into question', and making an audience feel guilty or disturbed, are all intimately linked by objects like this. They are attitudes which are typical of much postmodernist art, and they often have a political dimension. The artwork for which Martin Creed won the Turner Prize in 2001 continues this tradition. It is an empty room, in which the electric lights go on and off.

I will be writing about postmodernist artists, intellectual gurus, academic critics, philosophers, and social scientists in what follows, as if they were all members of a loosely constituted and quarrelsome political party. This party is by and large internationalist and 'progressive'. It is on the left rather than the right, and it tends to see everything, from abstract painting to personal relationships, as political undertakings. It is not particularly unified in doctrine, and even those who have most significantly contributed ideas to its manifestos sometimes indignantly deny membership – and yet the postmodernist party tends to believe that its time has come. It is certain of its uncertainty, and often claims that it has seen through the sustaining illusions of others, and so has grasped the 'real' nature of the cultural and political institutions which surround us. In doing this, postmodernists often follow Marx. They claim to be

peculiarly aware of the unique state of contemporary society, immured as it is in what they call 'the postmodern condition'.

Postmodernists therefore do not simply support aesthetic 'isms', or avant-garde movements, such as minimalism or conceptualism (from which work like Andre's bricks emerged). They have a distinct way of seeing the world as a whole, and use a set of philosophical ideas that not only support an aesthetic but also analyse a 'late capitalist' cultural condition of 'postmodernity'. This condition is supposed to affect us all, not just through avant-garde art, but also at a more fundamental level, through the influence of that huge growth in media communication by electronic means which Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s called the 'electronic village'. And yet in our new 'information society', paradoxically enough, most information is apparently to be distrusted, as being more of a contribution to the manipulative image-making of those in power than to the advancement of knowledge. The postmodernist attitude is therefore one of a suspicion which can border on paranoia (as seen, for example, in the conspiracy-theory novels of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, and the films of Oliver Stone).

A major Marxist commentator on postmodernism, Frederic Jameson, sees Jon Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as entirely symptomatic of this condition. Its extraordinary complexities of entranceways, its aspiration towards being 'a complete world, a kind of miniature city', and its perpetually moving elevators, make it a 'mutation' into a 'postmodernist hyperspace' which transcends the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to find its own position in a mappable world. This 'milling confusion', says Jameson, is a dilemma, a 'symbol and analogue' of the 'incapacity of our minds . . . to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects'. Many of us have felt something like this in London's Barbican Centre.

This 'lost in a big hotel' view of our condition shows postmodernism



**1. Interior of Westin Bonaventure Hotel by Portman.
'Postmodernist hyperspace'.**

to be a doctrine for the metropolis, within which a new climate of ideas has arisen and brought with it a new sensibility. But these ideas and attitudes have always been very much open to debate, and in what follows I shall combat postmodernist scepticism with some of my own. Indeed, I will deny that its philosophical and political views and art forms are nearly as dominant as a confident proclamation of a new 'postmodernist' era might suggest.

It is nevertheless obvious by now that even if we restrict ourselves to the ideas current within the artistic avant-garde since 1945, we can sense a break with those of the modernist period. The work of James Joyce is very different from that of Alain Robbe-Grillet, that of Igor Stravinsky from that of Karlheinz Stockhausen, that of Henri Matisse from that of Robert Rauschenberg, of Jean Renoir from that of Jean-Luc Godard, of Jacob Epstein from that of Carl Andre, and of Mies van der Rohe from that of Robert Venturi. What one makes of this contrast between the modern and the postmodern in the arts largely depends on the values one embraces. There is no single line of development to be found here.

Many of these differences arose from the sensitivity of artists to changes in the climate of ideas. By the mid-1960s, critics like Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan had begun to point out some of the characteristics, in Europe and in the United States, of what we now call postmodernism. They argued that the work of postmodernists was deliberately less unified, less obviously 'masterful', more playful or anarchic, more concerned with the processes of our understanding than with the pleasures of artistic finish or unity, less inclined to hold a narrative together, and certainly more resistant to a certain interpretation, than much of the art that had preceded it. We will look at some examples of this later on.

The rise of theory

Somewhat later than the period in which the artists mentioned above established themselves, a further postmodernist

development took place: 'the rise of theory' among intellectuals and academics. Workers in all sorts of fields developed an excessively critical self-consciousness. Postmodernists reproached modernists (and their supposedly 'naive' liberal humanist readers or spectators or listeners) for their belief that a work of art could somehow appeal to all humanity, and so be free of divisive political implications.

The rise of the great post-war innovatory artists – Stockhausen, Boulez, Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, Coover, Rauschenberg, and Beuys – was succeeded (and many would say supplemented and explained) by the huge growth in the influence of a number of French intellectuals, notably the Marxist social theorist Louis Althusser, the cultural critic Roland Barthes, the philosopher Jacques Derrida, and the historian Michel Foucault, all of whom in fact began their work by thinking about the implications of modernism, and rarely had any very extended relationship to the contemporary avant-garde. Althusser was concerned with Brecht; Barthes with Flaubert and Proust; Derrida with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Mallarmé; and Foucault with Nietzsche and Bataille. By the mid-1970s it becomes difficult to know what matters most to postmodernists – the fashioning of a particular kind of (disturbing) experience within art, or the new philosophical and political interpretative opportunities which it offered. Many would now say that for committed postmodernists, interpretative implications were always (and disastrously) 'privileged' over the enjoyable artistic embodiment and formal sophistication which so many had learned to appreciate in modernist art.

This startlingly new framework of ideas was exported from the France of the late 1960s and early 1970s into England, Germany, and the United States. By the time of the student uprisings of 1968, the most advanced philosophical thought had moved away from the strongly ethical and individualist existentialism that was typical of the immediately post-war period (of which Sartre and Camus were the best-publicized exponents) towards far more sceptical and anti-humanist attitudes. These new beliefs were expressed in what came

