POSTMODERN DEBATES

edited by simon malpas

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palgrave

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General Editor's Preface

Culture is the element we inhabit as subjects.

Culture embraces the whole range of practices, customs and representations of a society. In their rituals, stories and images, societies identify what they perceive as good and evil, proper, sexually acceptable, racially other. Culture is the location of values, and the study of cultures shows how values vary from one society to another, or from one historical moment to the next.

But culture does not exist in the abstract. On the contrary, it is in the broadest sense of the term textual, inscribed in the paintings, operas, sculptures, furnishings, fashions, bus tickets and shopping lists which are the currency of both aesthetic and everyday exchange. Societies invest these artefacts with meanings, until in many cases the meanings are so 'obvious' that they pass for nature. Cultural criticism denaturalises and defamiliarises these meanings, isolating them for inspection and analysis.

The subject is what speaks, or, more precisely, what signifies, and subjects learn in culture to reproduce or to challenge the meanings and values inscribed in the signifying practices of the society that shapes them.

If culture is pervasive and constitutive for us, if it resides in the documents, objects and practices that surround us, if it circulates as the meanings and values we learn and reproduce as good citizens, how in these circumstances can we practise cultural *criticism*, where criticism implies a certain distance between the critic and the culture? The answer is that cultures are not homogeneous; they are not even necessarily coherent. There are always other perspectives, so that cultures offer alternative positions for the subjects they also recruit. Moreover, we have a degree of power over the messages we reproduce. A minor modification changes the script, and may alter the meaning; the introduction of a negative constructs a resistance.

The present moment in our own culture is one of intense debate. Sexual alignments, family values, racial politics, the implications of economic differences are all hotly contested. And positions are taken up not only in explicit discussions at political meetings, on television and in the pub. They are often reaffirmed or challenged implicitly in films and advertisements, horoscopes and lonely-hearts columns. Cultural criticism analyses all these forms in order to assess their hold on our consciousness.

There is no interpretative practice without theory, and the more sophisticated the theory, the more precise and perceptive the reading it makes possible. Cultural theory is as well defined now as it has ever been, and as strongly contested as our social values. There could not, in consequence, be a more exciting time to engage in the theory and practice of Cultural Criticism.

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Contents

POSTMODERNITY, IDENTITY, GENDER

THE POSTCOLONIAL AND THE POSTMODERN

THE POLITICS OF POSTMODERNITY

1

Introduction

Simon Malpas

The postmodern is neither a contemporary fashion nor a unified movement. More than anything else, it is a space for debate. Whether they are for it or against it, so many of the different theories about meaning, identity and politics in today's world revolve around the postmodern that it has become a site of intense and often heated discussion across the cultural spectrum. It is therefore important for anybody approaching cultural criticism to have a working knowledge of postmodernity and postmodernism if they want to examine how the world might be experienced and understood now. More than any other contemporary critical idea, the postmodern (and its cognates postmodernism and postmodernity) is concerned with how people live today, with the issues that face individuals and societies across the world.

The aim of this book is to bring together some of the debates between prominent thinkers in critical theory, philosophy and cultural studies in order to introduce readers to the importance of the issues at stake in postmodern theory. Rather than attempting to give an account of a unified movement, which the postmodern is certainly not, this book explores appropriations of the term by thinkers whose projects and political views are often at odds. Postmodern theory has become a space in which practically the whole range of different forms of modern critical enquiry intersect: many feminists are concerned with the implications of postmodernity, as are writers on race and colonialism, political theorists and philosophers. Each group brings different interests and discussions to bear on the postmodern, and draws different conclusions about its usefulness. These thinkers and discussions will be the focus of this book, which sets out to treat the postmodern as a context for debates about truth, politics, meaning and identity, with the aim of encouraging readers to think through some of the consequences of postmodern theories for contemporary culture. The purpose of this introduction is to provide a general outline of some of the key characteristics of postmodernism and postmodernity, and to dispel some of the myths that have grown up around the extensive use of these terms in the popular media.

1

POPULAR POSTMODERNISM

During the last 15 or 20 years, the postmodern has become a term that, although often poorly understood, is almost impossible to avoid. Outside of academia, it is most commonly encountered in the media. More so, perhaps, than any other critical or theoretical movement, postmodernism has become a part of the popular cultures of late twentieth-century Europe and America. At the beginning of the 1990s, 'postmodernism' was a word that anyone with an interest in culture simply couldn't escape. Each new development in the arts, in architecture, literature, and in culture generally, seemed to be greeted with the epithet, 'postmodern'. Panels of pundits on television and radio art shows hailed or dismissed every new fashion by determining just how postmodern it was. It was difficult to know just what this postmodernism might be, but there was no doubt that it was 'now'. Whether it was good or bad seemed hardly to matter: one could take one's pick, defining postmodernism as either the most up-to-date, radical and chic innovation of a world that just kept on getting better, or, alternatively, using it to mark the decline of artistic standards in an ever expanding, market-oriented culture for which saleability was the only marker of aesthetic value.

As a media buzz-word, though, 'postmodernism' subsequently seemed to have fallen a little out of fashion. For some pundits, it came to seem too common and too open to debate to be a safe slogan with which to pepper their conversation in the hope of appearing up to the minute. The term began to mark mystification in the face of what is new: statements like, 'this book is postmodern (whatever that might mean . . .)', have become useful ways of hedging one's bets in a culture that seems far less certain of the status of its critical judgements than it did a decade ago.

However, the postmodern has always been much more than a journalistic term. Indeed, the media frenzy about postmodernism has frequently served to cover up the complex and important critical work that is being done on postmodern culture in a range of humanities disciplines. The idea of the postmodern that tends to prevail in media discussions is one based purely on a model of artistic production. In this model, postmodernism is the latest aesthetic movement that follows on from modernism and is more experimental, more self-knowing, more fashionable, than the work of people like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, who themselves came to transform the realism of nineteenth-century art.[1] Such fashion-based ideas of postmodernism fail to address the deeper and more radical changes that are taking place in the world today.

This idea of a purely stylistic postmodernism also tends to efface the work of writers in other areas of the humanities such as history, sociology, politics, philosophy and anthropology. In contradistinction to postmodernism, a notion of postmodernity has come to be important in all of these areas,

challenging traditional means of thinking about the subject matter of each of the disciplines and breaking down some of the boundaries between them. There is a tendency to differentiate between postmodernism as an artistic movement and postmodernity as the general social condition that is studied in these disciplines. In the latter case, postmodernity marks the transformation that has taken place in society during the last few decades with the rise of new forms of capitalism, the development of communications technology such as the internet, the collapse of the Soviet Union which saw the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of voices from different cultures to disrupt the traditional white, male, European ideas of a universal human nature referred to as mankind or simply 'Man'.[2]

However, any strong opposition between postmodernism and postmodernity is probably too reductive because it splits artistic and cultural movements off from the society in which they are produced, and presents them as separate areas of interest in a way that practically all of the writers contained in this book set out to challenge. As Fredric Jameson writes in the third essay in this volume, the postmodern 'is not just another word for the description of a particular style. It is also . . . a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order'.[3] One of the issues at stake in many of the essays, then, is how we might relate this cultural style to society, postmodernism to postmodernity, in a useful and productive way. These attempts to describe the links between artistic presentation and contemporary society have led thinkers to describe the postmodern as, variously, a 'condition', a 'cultural dominant' and a 'new horizon of our cultural, philosophical and political experience'.[4] In other words, in all of these cases, the postmodern concerns the way the world is for us now, both its social and political structures and also the means we might use to represent them. Instead of thinking of postmodernism as just a style and postmodernity as the state of everything else in the world, then, the essays in this book discuss the ramifications of the ways in which the two terms come together to form a complex postmodern condition that has a transformative effect across the whole range of arts and humanities disciplines.

The ideas of postmodernism and postmodernity that are prevalent in everyday culture, and which the media often use as labels to attach to anything new or different, are thus too reductive. They often function as a shorthand that covers over rather than opens up the important, complex and exciting issues that face today's culture. In order to engage with contemporary critical thought, a more nuanced idea of the postmodern is indispensable, and that is what this book sets out to provide.

But what is the postmodern? And how does it relate to the world in which we live today? As the different definitions offered by the essays included in this book will make clear, 'postmodern' is a very difficult term to pin down.

However, a crucial aspect of what is at stake for both postmodernism and postmodernity (which also provides some useful links between the two terms) is a transformation in the nature and status of narrative.

NARRATIVE AND METANARRATIVE

In the words of Jean-François Lyotard, one of the most important and influential writers about postmodernism, 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives'.[5] Despite the fact that Lyotard is 'simplifying', this is a complex idea. It is vitally important, though: at least in its 'simplified' form, this idea is shared by almost all of the writers whose work is included in this book, although the conclusions that each draws from it are very different. But what does it mean? What is a 'metanarrative'? And why do postmodernists distrust them?

A narrative recounts a series of events, tying together things that happen in order to present them in the form of a story. Although commonly associated with fiction, narratives also engage with events that actually take place: historical accounts of anything from agricultural crop rotation to the independence struggles of emerging nations in Africa are related as series of events linked to form narratives. In a similar manner, philosophical ideas such as René Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' are presented as conclusions drawn from series of premises tied together by the causal links of a narrative sequence. Scientific and political studies such as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* or Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* present their arguments and insights in the form of a narrative, in these cases as stories either of evolution or revolution. Even the stories that we tell about ourselves, or that others tell about us, are governed by narrative structures. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, often referred to as the 'talking cure', is based on the process of a patient relating the story of the symptoms of his or her illness to the analyst: they describe their childhood, their dreams and experiences, and it is through the gaps in these narratives that repressed unconscious desires come to light. In this sense, it is through narrative that we gain ideas of who we are and an understanding of the world in which we live.

In each of the examples I have given, there are sets of rules that determine the form in which the events that are narrated should be linked together in order that the story can be told. These rules might take the form of logical progression in philosophy, temporal development in history, free association in psychoanalysis or cause and effect in science. Different genres of writing have traditionally had different sets of rules to define how narrative is used.[6] For example, one might recall the difference between poetry and history that Aristotle describes in the *Poetics*:

the poet's function is not to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of things that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either possible or necessary. The difference between the historian and the poet is not that the one writes in prose and the other in verse...The difference is that one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen.[7]

In other words, while the historical narrative draws together events that have happened, the links in the poet's narrative are based on the probability of one event leading to another – even if neither of those events have happened or could ever happen. Of course, in modern culture the relations between different genres (and perhaps particularly fiction and history) are much more complex than this, but each type of speech or writing will be subject to rules that determine whether it is constructed in a way that is legitimate for the genre in which it appears.

The name given to those sets of rules is metalanguage or metanarrative. So, in other words, a metanarrative is the collection of rules that determine whether a given statement or narrative is legitimate within a particular genre of discourse. For example, the statement 'My love is like a red, red rose' might be thought of as highly evocative and moving within poetic discourse, but would not be considered acceptable for a textbook on botany. And this is not just the case for academic writing. Anything we say, write or hear is produced according to metanarrative rules that determine whether it makes sense, or is well formed, or not. Lyotard describes the relationship between languages and metalanguages in the following way:

> languages are not employed haphazardly, however. Their use is subject to a condition we call pragmatic: each must formulate its own rules and petition the addressee to accept them. To satisfy this condition, an axiomatic is defined that includes a definition of the symbols used in the proposed language, a description of the form expressions in this language must take in order to gain acceptance (well formed expressions), and an enumeration of the operations that may be performed on the accepted expressions (axioms in the narrow sense).[8]

A metanarrative thus sets out the axioms (the principles or laws) that allow communication to take place, and determines the legitimacy of a narrative for a particular genre, as well as giving the rules to determine its truth or falsity.

These metanarratives are not simply natural sets of rules, however. Different rules are set up at different points of history by different philosophies that have different political interests, and are constantly in the process of transformation as new discoveries or ways of thinking emerge. For example,

the philosophy of science charts the developments of scientific discovery and lays down the rules for what might constitute a properly scientific explanation. And, of course, these rules change: in medieval times science was based on forms of religious belief that are no longer prevalent or even plausible for modern sciences; during the Renaissance alchemy was considered by many to be a branch of science, but no mainstream scientist would today consider the attempt to turn lead into gold a properly scientific area of investigation. With Newtonian physics and Einstein's principles of relativity (not to mention modern quantum physics or chaos theory) the rules of scientific discourse change again to take account of new discoveries and ways of approaching the world. And it is not only the contents of the narrative that change as science develops, what counts as a scientific argument, what can be true or false, even the nature of what is considered evidence is also tranformed. In this way, the rules of the scientific metalanguage alter both the formal criteria for science and also the way in which science presents the world itself.

MODERNITY AND THE GRAND NARRATIVE

The idea that metanarratives develop as history progresses is the central tenet of what many of the writers in this book refer to as modernity. This idea is what allows Lyotard to distinguish between modernity and what he calls the 'classical age' which is based on 'the way that myth organises and distributes time, creating a rhythm of the beginning and end of the story it recounts, to the point of making them rhyme'.[9] Modernity, then, is based on the idea of progressive changes in the rules of narrative, whereas the classical age is constructed by the mythical narratives of a continual return to the same in which there is no historical development of metanarratives, just the continuous present of mythical time. Because of this notion of continual progressive change and development, modernity is frequently described as the period of the 'grand narrative'. According to Jürgen Habermas, 'modernity expresses the conviction that the future has already begun: It is the epoch that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future'.[10] If modernity is based on the idea that the world is in a constant state of change and progress, its aim is to generate a philosophical account of this change that will bring together the diverse events and experiences under the auspices of a grand narrative capable of presenting a link between the past, present and future. In the words of Immanuel Kant,

> Since the philosopher cannot presuppose any [conscious] individual purpose among men in their great drama, there is no other expedient for him except to try to see if he can discover a natural purpose in this idiotic