An Introductory Guide to
CULTURAL THEORY
AND
POPULAR CULTURE

John Storey

The University of Georgia Press
Athens
Postmodernism is a term current inside and outside the academic study of popular culture. It has entered discourses as diverse as pop music journalism and Marxist debates on the cultural conditions of late or multinational capitalism. As a concept it shows little sign of slowing down its centrifugal proliferation. Hebdige suggests some of its current (1988) meanings:

When it becomes possible for people to describe as ‘postmodern’ the decor of a room, the design of a building, the diegesis of a film, the construction of a record, or a ‘scratch’ video, a television commercial, or an arts documentary, or the ‘intermedial’ relations between them, the layout of a page in a fashion magazine or critical journal, an anti-teleological tendency within epistemology, the attack on the ‘metaphysics of presence’, a general attenuation of feeling, the collective chagrin and morbid projections of a post-War generation of baby boomers confronting disillusioned middle age, the ‘predicament’ of reification, a group of rhetorical tropes, a proliferation of surfaces, a new phase in commodity fetishism, a fascination for images, codes and styles, a process of cultural, political, or existential fragmentation and/or crisis, the ‘de-centring’ of the subject, an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, the replacement of unitary power axes by a plurality of power/discourse formations, the ‘implosion of meaning’, the collapse of cultural hierarchies, the dread engendered by the threat of nuclear self-destruction, the decline of the university, the functioning and effects of the new miniaturised technologies, broad societal and economic shifts into a ‘media’, ‘consumer’ or ‘multinational’ phase, a sense (depending on who you read) of ‘placelessness’ or the abandonment of placelessness (‘critical regionalism’) or (even) a generalised substitution of spatial for temporal coordinates – when it becomes possible to describe all these things as ‘postmodern’ (or more simply, using a current abbreviation, as ‘post’ or ‘very post’) then it’s clear we are in the presence of a buzzword.

Buzzword or not, it is clear that, given the range of usage, postmodernism exists. The critical debate about its existence confirms this. Even those critics who deny its existence contribute to the debate on postmodernism with their acts of denial and thus contribute to the substantiation of postmodernism. For the purposes of this discussion I shall consider postmodernism only as it relates to the study of popular culture. To facilitate this I shall focus on the development of postmodern theory from its beginnings in the United States and Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, through its theorization in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson. This will be followed by a discussion of two examples of postmodernist culture: pop and television.

Postmodernism in the 1960s

Although the term postmodern had been in cultural circulation since the 1870s, it is only in the 1960s that we see the beginnings of what is now understood as postmodernism. In the work of Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler we encounter the celebration of what Sontag calls a ‘new sensibility’, a new pluralism following the supposed collapse of the distinction between high and popular culture. It is a sensibility in revolt against the normalizing function of modernism; its rebellion is an attack on the canonization of modernism’s rebellion, an attack on modernism’s official status as the high culture of the modern capitalist world. What these critics oppose is not so much the project of modernism as its canonization in the museum and the academy. Their work contains a lament for the scandalous and bohemian power of modernism, its ability to shock and disgust the middle class. Instead of outraging from the critical margins of bourgeois society, the work of Pablo Picasso, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Bertolt Brecht, Igor Strawinsky, etc. has not only lost the ability to shock and disturb, it has become central, classical: in a word – canonized. Modernist culture has become bourgeois culture. Its subversive power has been drained by the academy and the museum. It is now the canon against which an avant-garde must struggle. As Fredric Jameson points out,
This is surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself, since the younger generation of the 1960s will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics, which 'weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living', as Marx once said in a different context.5

Jameson argues that postmodernism was born out of

the shift from an oppositional to a hegemonic position of the classics of modernism, the latter's conquest of the university, the art gallery network and the foundations, the assimilation . . . of the various high modernisms, into the 'canon' and the subsequent attenuation of everything in them felt by our grandparents to be shocking, scandalous, ugly, dissonant, immoral and antisocial.5

One response to modernism's incorporation was a re-evaluation of popular culture. Modernism, despite its often quoting of popular culture, is marked by a deep suspicion of all things popular. Its entry into the museum and the academy was undoubtedly made easier (despite its declared antagonism to bourgeois philistinism) by its appeal to, and homologous relationship with, the elitism of class society. The postmodernism of the 1960s was therefore in part a populist attack on the elitism of modernism. It signalled a refusal of what Andreas Huyssen calls 'the great divide . . . [a] discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture'.6 Moreover, according to Huyssen, 'To a large extent, it is by the distance we have travelled from this "great divide" between mass culture and modernism that we can measure our own cultural postmodernity'.7 Nevertheless, in much of the theory which follows, postmodernism signifies a culture of kitsch, when measured against the 'real' culture of modernism.

Hal Foster distinguishes between 'a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo and a postmodernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction'.8 Foster adds that the postmodernism of resistance not only attacks modernism, but also reactionary postmodernism. Together with the positive cultural discourse of Fiedler, Sontag, and Ihab Hassan, there was the negative cultural discourse of George Steiner, Irving Howe, Harry Levin and Daniel Bell. Western societies and cultures were seen to be in decline, and part of the problem was the combative nature of contemporary popular culture.

Both the positive and negative theorists were responding to developments in contemporary capitalism – though rarely conceptualizing them as such – which was going through an expansionist cycle and producing new commodities, abundance, and a more affluent lifestyle. Its advertising, credit plans, media, and commodity spectacles were encouraging gratification, hedonism, and the adoption of new habits, cultural forms, and lifestyles which would later be termed postmodern. Some theorists were celebrating the new diversity and affluence, while others were criticizing the decay of traditional values or increased powers of social control. . . . Thus, by the 1980s, the postmodern discourses were split into cultural conservatists decrying the new developments and avant-gardists celebrating them.9

The American and British pop art of the 1950s and the 1960s also denies the distinction between popular and high culture. It rejects Arnold's definition of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said'; preferring instead Williams's anthropological definition of culture as 'a whole way of life'. The term pop art was first coined by the British artist Richard Hamilton in the 1950s.10 Pop art was then developed by the Independent Group of artists and critics who met at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts in the 1950s. It was a movement that dreamed of America from the grey deprivation of 1950s Britain. Lawrence Alloway was the movement's first theorist:

The area of contact was mass-produced urban culture: movies, advertising, science fiction, pop music. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as a fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically. One result of our discussions was to take Pop culture out of the realm of 'escapism', 'sheer entertainment', 'relaxation', and to treat it with the seriousness of art.11

Andy Warhol was a key figure in the theorizing of pop art. Warhol refuses the distinction between commercial and non-commercial art. He sees 'commercial art as real art and real art as commercial art'.12 He claims that

'real' art is defined simply by the taste (and wealth) of the ruling class of the period. This implies not only that commercial art is just as good as 'real' art – its value simply being defined by other social groups, other patterns of expenditure.13

We can of course object that Warhol's merging of high and popular culture is somewhat bogus. Whatever the source of his ideas and
material, once located in an art gallery the context determines them as art and thus high culture. John Rockwell argues that this was not the intention or the necessary outcome. Art, he argues, is what you perceive as art:

A Brillo box isn’t suddenly art because Warhol puts a stacked bunch of them in a museum. But by putting them there he encourages you to make your every trip to the supermarket an artistic adventure, and in so doing he has exalted your life. Everybody’s an artist if they want to be. 14

Huyssen claims that the full impact of the relationship between pop art and popular culture can only be fully understood when located within the larger cultural context of the American counterculture and the British underground scene:

Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape, and from the beginning until today, the most significant trends within postmodernism have challenged modernism’s relentless hostility to mass culture. 15

Postmodernism was thus born out of a generational refusal of the categorical certainties of high modernism. The insistence on a categorical distinction between high and popular culture came to be regarded as the ‘un-hip’ assumptions of an older generation. One sign of this collapse was the merging of art and pop music. For example, Peter Blake designed the Beatles’ Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band album, Richard Hamilton designed their ‘white album’, Andy Warhol designed the Rolling Stones’ album, Sticky Fingers.

Huyssen sees a clear relationship between the American postmodernism of the 1960s and certain aspects of an earlier European avant-garde; seeing the American counterculture – its opposition to the war in Vietnam, its support for black civil rights, its rejection of the elitism of high modernism, its birthing of the second wave of feminism, its cultural experimentalism, its alternative theatre, its happenings, its love-ins, its celebration of the everyday, its psychedelic art, its acid rock, its ‘acid perspectivism’ (Hedligie) – as ‘the closing chapter in the tradition of avantgardism’. 16 That is, ‘an American avantgarde and the endgame of international avantgardism’. 17

By the late 1970s the debate about postmodernism crosses the Atlantic. The next three sections will consider the responses of two French cultural theorists to the debate on the ‘new sensibility’, before returning to America and Jameson’s account of postmodernism and postmodernist culture.

Jean-François Lyotard

Jean-François Lyotard’s principal contribution to the debate on postmodernism is The Postmodern Condition, published in France in 1979, translated into English in 1984. The influence of this book on the debate has been enormous. In many respects it was this book which introduced the term postmodernism into ‘general’ circulation: ‘Lyotard has emerged as the champion of difference and plurality in all theoretical realms and discourses, while energetically attacking totalizing and universalizing theories and methods.’ 18 For Lyotard the postmodern condition is marked by a crisis in the status of knowledge in Western societies. This is expressed ‘as incredulity towards metanarratives’ and ‘the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation’. 19 What he means by this is the supposed contemporary rejection of all overarching and totalizing thought: Marxism, liberalism, Christianity, etc., that tell universalist stories (metanarratives) which organize and justify the everyday practices of a plurality of different stories (narratives). According to Lyotard, metanarratives operate through inclusion and exclusion as homogenizing forces, marshalling heterogeneity into ordered realms; silencing and excluding other discourses, other voices in the name of universal principles and general goals. Postmodernism is said to signal the collapse of all universalist metanarratives with their privileged truth to tell, and to witness instead the increasing sound of a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on cultural diversity, and the claims of heterogeneity over homogeneity.

Lyotard’s particular focus is the function of narrative within scientific discourse and knowledge. His interest is not so much in scientific knowledge and procedures as such, as in the forms by which such knowledge and procedures gain or claim legitimacy. 20 Science is important for Lyotard because of the role assigned to it by the Enlightenment. Its task, through the accumulation of scientific knowledge, is to play a central role in the gradual emancipation of humankind. Science has thus assumed the status of a metanarrative, organizing and validating other narratives on the royal road to human liberation. However, Lyotard claims that since the Second World War the legitimating force of