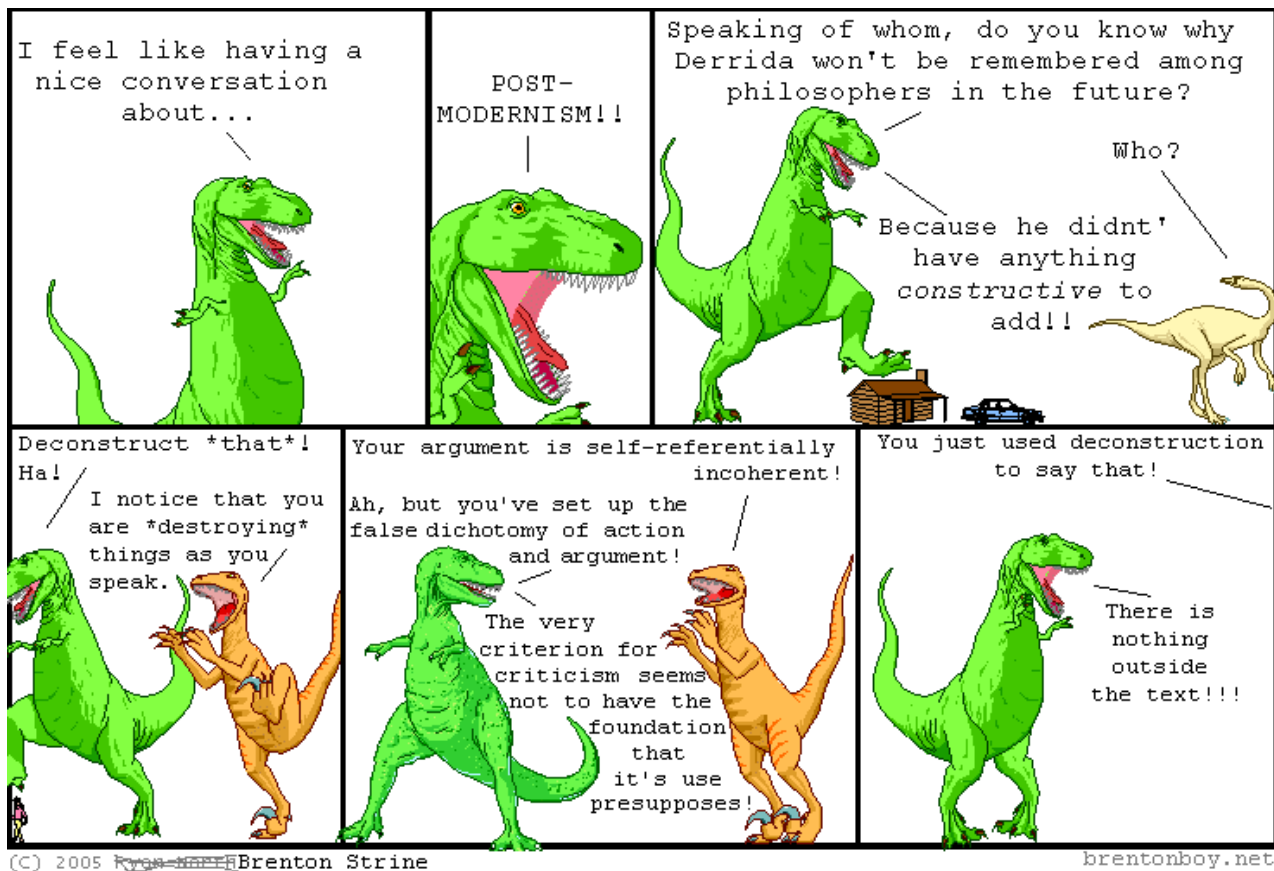


### Postmodernism

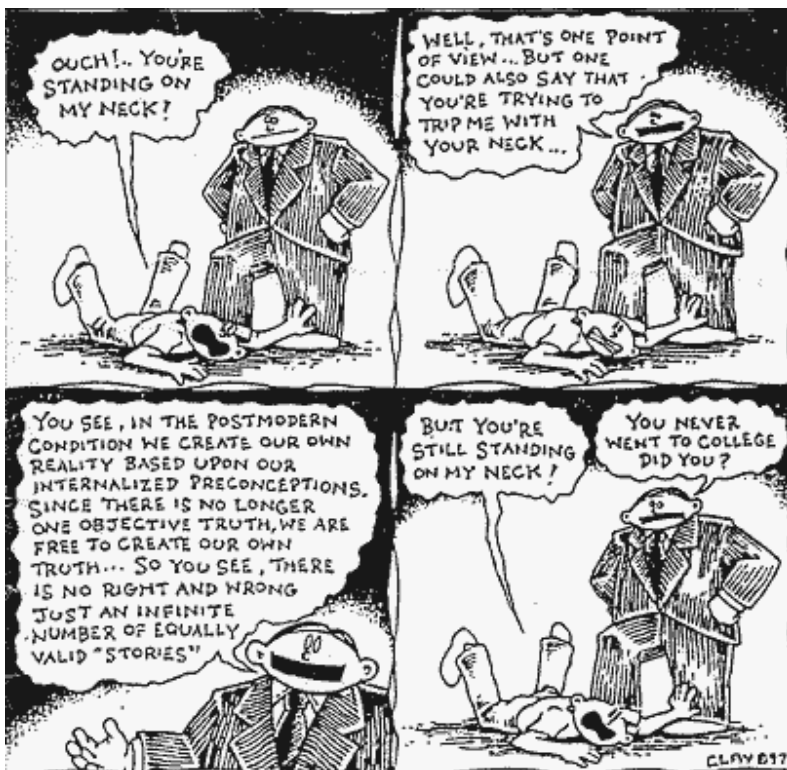


Postmodernism is related to the term “modernism”. “Post” means to come after. In other words, postmodern thought is that which comes after or develops from modernistic thought. Firstly one has to understand modernism.

**Modernism** refers to a certain period of western cultural, artistic and sociological history. This period covers the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernism is a vague and general term that refers to a period of great change in the western world. This change refers mainly to an alteration in thinking and a development of different views of reality. There are a number of historical factors that are important in understanding modernism. One of the main factors that precipitated this radical change in thinking was the First World War. This war was so devastating and, with the introduction of modern technology, tanks and planes, it changed the perception of Europeans towards their authorities and led them to question the “establishment”. Something must be wrong, they thought, when almost an entire generation of young Englishmen was exterminated for no real purpose.

Coupled with events like war were discoveries in science and other disciplines which overturned centuries of belief and convention. One needs only think of Einstein and the theory of relativity and Freud and the theory of the unconscious. Freud’s theory of the unconscious opened up a new world of previously unimagined human experience and led to a new perception of the self as well as new art and art forms. Carl Jung continued this idea and developed the theory of archetypes that suggests that all humanity, across cultural and racial barriers, share a common memory. There are many other

historical, philosophical and scientific changes during this period. The common factor here is that all these events led to a deep and radical questioning of the status quo. The world and the view of reality that had been generally dominant in western society for centuries were questioned and overturned. New disciplines and particularly art forms emerged as a reaction to the old ways of seeing things. Some of the major figures that helped to change and redefine literature were Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Proust, Mallarme, Kafka, and Rilke.



In order to understand postmodernism we first have to understand what modernism was reacting against. Modernism was a reaction to the perceived world view of the time and the condition of modern civilization. However, many thinkers and philosophers felt that modernism itself had certain restrictions and that modernistic thought still relied on basic foundational concepts that were tied to the past. For example, a central area of concern for many philosophers, like Jacques Derrida, was that modernistic thinking still took place in a linear and rational framework. In other words, people were changing the outer aspects, but not the basic precepts and concepts that form the foundations of old thought. Linear thinking is essentially thinking in a cause and effect way, in a straight line. Non-linear thinking, which began to be supported by science and in particular physics, started to gain academic respectability. Theories like Curved Space and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, all led to more questioning of the foundations of modern thinking. Scientists began to question their belief in the possibility of pure objectivity and experiments were undertaken that proved that the experimenter had a direct physical effect on the experiment. In other words, there was no way in which subjectivity could be absolutely separated for objectivity.

One of the main characteristics of postmodern thinking is that the world is seen as a much more complex and uncertain place. Reality is no longer fixed or determined. All truth within a postmodern context is relative to one's viewpoint or stance. The world is a representation. In other words, it is a

fiction created from a specific point of view only, and not a final truth. This is an uncomfortable viewpoint for many people and there is much misunderstanding about this idea of postmodernism. Postmodernism is essentially still in its infancy. It is an attempt to think beyond the confines of the past. Derrida, one of the chief exponents of post-structuralism, coined a term called "deconstruction" which means a philosophical method of looking for weak points in modern thinking and established ways of perception. The "master narratives" or established viewpoints are scrutinized for inconsistencies or "fissures" in the way western thinking takes place.

**Firstly**, like modernism, postmodernism rejects all boundaries. This rejection also includes the boundaries between different forms and genres of art. The art development of bricolage and pastiche are examples of this. **Secondly**, there is a concentration on fragmentation and discontinuity as well as ambiguity. The postmodern focuses on a de-structured, de-centered humanity. What this really means is that the idea of disorder and fragmentation, which were previously seen as negative qualities, are seen as an acceptable representation of reality by postmodernists. Modernism considered the fragmented view of human life as bad or tragic, while postmodernists rather celebrate this seemingly meaningless view of the world. It is an acceptance of the chaos that encourages a play with meaning. Postmodernism also accepts the possibility of ambiguity. Things and events can have two different meanings at the same time. A more rigid rational and logocentric or linear approach tries to avoid or reduce ambiguity as much as possible. Postmodern thought sees simultaneous views not as contradictory but as an integral part of the complex patterning of reality.

Postmodernism is an attempt to question the world that we see around us and especially not to take other people's views as the final truth. Postmodernism puts everything into question and radically interrogates philosophies, strategies and world views. There is no such thing as a definition of the postmodern. It is a mood rather than a strict discipline. Postmodernism, with all its complexity and possible excesses, is an attempt to find new and more truthful versions of the world.

Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, is hard to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. However, unifying features often coincide with Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the **meta-narrative**<sup>1</sup> and Jacques Derrida's concept of "play," and Jean Baudrillard's "**simulacra**"<sup>2</sup>. For example, instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author eschews, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest. This distrust of totalizing mechanisms extends even to the author; thus postmodern writers often celebrate chance over craft and employ metafiction<sup>3</sup> to undermine the author's "univocal" control (the control of only one voice). The

<sup>1</sup> The prefix meta means "beyond" and is here used to mean "about", and a narrative is a story. Therefore, a metanarrative is a story *about* a story, encompassing and explaining other 'little stories' within totalizing schemes.

<sup>2</sup> From the Latin *simulacrum* which means "likeness, similarity", in the late 16th century, used to describe a representation of another thing, such as a statue or a painting, especially of a god; by the late 19th century, it had gathered a secondary association of inferiority: an image without the substance or qualities of the original.

<sup>3</sup> **Metafiction** is a type of fiction that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction. It is the literary term describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually, irony and self-reflection. It can be compared to presentational theatre, which does not let the audience forget it is viewing a play; metafiction does not let the reader forget he or she is reading a fictional work.

distinction between high and low culture is also attacked with the employment of **pastiche**<sup>4</sup>, the combination of multiple cultural elements including subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature. A list of postmodern authors often varies; the following are some names of authors often so classified, most of them belonging to the generation born in the interwar period: William Burroughs (1914-1997), Alexander Trocchi (1925-1984), Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), John Barth (b. 1930), Donald Barthelme (1931-1989), E. L. Doctorow (b. 1931), Robert Coover (1932), Jerzy Kosinski (1933-1991) Don DeLillo (b. 1936), Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937), Ishmael Reed (1938), Kathy Acker (1947-1997), **Paul Auster** (b. 1947), Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952).

Postmodern art, media and literature can be characterized by **intertextuality**<sup>5</sup> as the narrative mode, and the postmodern period can be characterized by the death of the grand narratives as proclaimed by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). The grand narratives such as religions, ideologies and the enlightenment project have been substituted by the small, local narratives, e.g. love of one's family.

Interesting website:

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/pomo.html>

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<sup>4</sup> The word **pastiche** describes a literary or other artistic genre. The word has two competing meanings, meaning either a hodge-podge (a lot of things mixed up together in no order) or an imitation. Pastiche is intertextual in its very form as it is a recreation of an earlier text. In the postmodern pastiche the older text (the hypotext) may reflect one of the bygone grand narratives, yet its new postmodern version may reflect a local narrative, so that the two enter into a dialogue in the pastiche.

<sup>5</sup> **Intertextuality** is the shaping of texts' meanings by other texts. It can refer to an author's borrowing and transformation of a prior text or to a reader's referencing of one text in reading another. The term "intertextuality" has, itself, been borrowed and transformed many times since it was coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966.

