

POSTMODERNISM

philosophical postmodernism is the final stage of a long reaction to the Enlightenment
modern thought, the idea of modernity itself, stems from the Enlightenment

thus one must review the central tenants of Enlightenment philosophy
must understand how European history and philosophy come together in late 16th and 17th
centuries

think of the authoritarian rule of kings and the church
the feudal world based on a ruling aristocracy
society based on rigid metaphysical and epistemological beliefs
Earth at the center of the universe, blessed by God
the rule of kings, bishops and popes was traced to God
the rulers had privileged sources of knowledge
any challenge to this authority led to pains too great to comprehend

but gradually this authority became undermined
first the Aristotelean cosmology is challenged by Copernicus and Galileo
astronomy revealed that the divine plan
“was much bigger, much more diffuse, and much less concerned with ‘God’s Earth’ and ‘God’s
creatures’ than the church would ever be willing to concede” (155).

Religious authority gradually replaced by emphasis on rational capacities of the individual
superstition and supernaturalism replaced by natural ways of knowing and understanding
mathematics, inductive and deductive reasoning, empirical observation
all gradually accepted as more important than Church doctrine
religion and the power of prayer replaced by science and the power of reason

Enlightenment emphasis on the natural light of reason in everyone
knowledge and understanding no longer held only by a privileged few
rationality, knowledge, understanding, and moral comprehension are democratized
truths are no longer hidden but conveyed to us in literal language
the naked truth in all its splendor revealed by language

“Truth, rationality, the possibility of natural (rather than supernatural) sources of knowledge, the
capacity of individuals to understand, to decipher, to invent, discover, discern, and so judge
independently of authority, were and remain the perennial themes of modern (Enlightenment)
philosophy” (156).

Postmodern philosophy begins with the denial of some of these themes in late 19th century
[begins with Nietzsche’s questioning of truth and rationality]
the term “postmodern” was the invention of artists
he mentions Charles Jencks citing the first appearance of the term

by British artist James Watkins Chapman in 1870's
[does not mention that Jencks was instrumental in popularizing the term in referring to
“postmodern” architecture
in *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986)
Jencks cites the destruction of some classic modernist housing project in the 1960's as the
beginning of postmodern architecture]

main features of philosophical postmodernism

1) a critique of the traditional notion of truth
that this kind of truth is at all attainable
[at least the idea of the naked truth]
a truth that reveals to us how things are in themselves
postmodernism really begins with a radicalization of Kant's
recognition that we cannot have unmediated access to things themselves, to brute facts

language is thus not constrained by an extra-linguistic world
[he is referring here to the overthrow of the representational theory of language—the idea that
words picture, or represent, things
interesting to note the parallels in the overthrowing of the
representational view of language
representational theory of truth
representational theory of art]

language is thus a ‘play of signs’
in which we creatively construct a world we mistakenly believe to be a world of brute reality
[Nietzsche's perspectivism in which the world that concerns us is a fiction]
[a product of the Apollinian drive to find order within chaos]
thus Derrida's critique of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ and ‘myth of logocentrism’
which is a critique of the idea that reality itself, real objects, real meaning, can be directly present
to us

2) critical also of the idea of “human nature” as something that is shared by all human beings
and which affords them the capacity to be rational
human nature is not something given but the product of historical and cultural developments
rationality is thus not a natural endowment
but a historically and culturally constructed achievement
appeals to reason and rationality are not then appeals to some neutral, widely shared common
ground
but is rather the product of the common human desire to control others
‘reason’ is but an instrument in the battle for power

“For the postmodernist, then, there are no foundational truths, no sets of privileged, rationally
unassailable propositions, on which our insights and understandings are based” (157)
[Nietzsche's ‘death of God’ is thus the beginning of postmodernism]
the individual is historically and socially constituted

understandings [or ‘truths’ in the more modest sense of Nietzsche’s perspectivism]
are the products of a historical process
a process which is often hidden and not acknowledged or seen by the knower
there is thus no neutral common ground or standpoint
from which an objective evaluation of competing views can be undertaken
we do not have an unbiased insight into the nature of things

motivations for postmodernism come from two seemingly different sources

1) an emphasis on community versus radical individualism of modernity
“almost sentimental yearning for community”
“marked hostility” to Enlightenment notion of individual autonomy
notes this yearning for community beginning with Hegel
who mourns the fragmentation of the community
[Hegel thus begins the critique of the Enlightenment]
the Hegelian line of thought leads one to recognize the historicity of the knowing subject
[the perspectivism of the knower]

2) excessive emphasis on the creative powers of the individual
[or shall we say the notion of philosophy as art]
here he identifies Nietzsche as “the first full-blown philosophical postmodernist” (157)
refers to the early essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense”
the well known passage in which truth is described as nothing more than metaphors
metaphors we have forgotten are metaphors
or illusions we have forgotten are illusions
thus we forget the origins of our knowledge of the world
[forget or don’t notice that it is all an Apollinian dream, the product of an artistic drive]

Nietzsche thus rejects absolute notions of reason, knowledge, and morality
these are only man-made “idols”
“there are thus no absolute facts, no truth, objective values, rationality, and knowledge”
what we regard as such is relative to our interests, to our perspectives

Postmodernism and philosophy of art

the conflict between modernism and postmodernism underlies
many of the more hotly contested issues in contemporary philosophy of art

theory of interpretation:

modernism: for any work of art there is and must be a single true interpretation

postmodernism: there is no one true interpretation

evaluation of works of art

modernism: a work of art can be genuinely good and it can have intrinsic formal properties that make it so (refers to Bell's theory of significant form)

postmodernism: artistic merit is a function of historical and cultural circumstance; what makes a work of art 'good' or 'beautiful' is not a set of intrinsic features of the work, but historically derived values and conventions of a particular culture

ontology of art

modernism: art exists independently of cultures and times; art transcends history; clear boundaries between art and life, between art and non-art

[another way to put this: modernism holds that there is an *essence* to art, an essence that enables one to answer the Socratic question with regard to art—to have a definition of that essence that would enable one to clearly distinguish what is art from what is not, and, furthermore, what is good or 'fine' art as opposed to popular art]

postmodernism: no intrinsic features that distinguish art from non-art

[the Socratic question cannot be posed to art—there is no *essence* to art, thus no way other than the historical conventions of a particular artworld for distinguishing between art and non-art, 'fine' and popular art]

role or function of art

modernism:

some modernists view art as a self-contained autonomous phenomenon [the heirs of Kant's notion of the aesthetic as an independent autonomous realm] and thus is not to be appreciated in terms of its instructive functions [does not have cognitive value]; in other words, what we can learn from art is incidental to its functions as art

some modernists argue that art may have a cognitive function, and thus cognitive content is integral to its value as art—but its powers of instruction are limited

postmodernism:

human cognition (or knowledge) is shaped by art, by human cultural products in general, and thus it is impossible to reach beyond the dominant narratives, texts, discourses, or 'vocabularies' to some supposed independent reality against which we can judge the truth or adequacy of knowledge

thus the perennial problems of the philosophy of art

—the identification of art, the interpretation and evaluation of art, whether or not art has cognitive content, problems about the perception of works of art, and the ways in which works of art exist—

all are shaped by this divide between modernism and postmodernism

The interpretation and evaluation debate

the modernist view that there is a single right interpretation of a work of art is based on the assumption that there are comparatively stable meanings that inhere in a work of art

on this view there is a single correct interpretation of any work that has a design or a meaning

the postmodernist critique of this idea can be traced to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and Roland Barthes' *S/Z*

Derrida's attack on the 'metaphysics of presence'

there are no extra-textual or extra-linguistic facts that could be apprehended directly which could thus constrain the sense that could be derived from any utterance, text or painting—any text, any work of art, has more than one meaning; and is, rather, an inexhaustible resource of meaning—

[thus Derrida's response to Shapiro and Heidegger's interpretation of a painting by Van Gogh]

there is thus nothing beyond the sign
all we have are systems of signs
no extra-textual reality that can tell us how signs are properly to be used

for any reading that privileges one interpretation over another it is always possible to 'reverse the hierarchy' and thus undermine that interpretation
this is what is meant by deconstruction
in an approach strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche
Derrida maintains it is always possible to construct other meanings, and thus offer different but perhaps equally plausible interpretations

on this view the aim is not to unlock some hidden meaning in the text or in the work of art
on the postmodern view there is no stable meaning to be discovered
there is only an ongoing play of meaning that can only be stabilized by artifice (through convention)

Roland Barthes

offers similar view
the goal of the literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text
the reader is not passive but active
the reader helps create the meanings that are found in the work
there is no point in asking whether a given interpretation is adequate to the text or work of art
what Barthes calls the 'Text' is a 'methodological field' that includes writer and reader

contrasts between a 'readerly' and a 'writerly' interpretation
a readerly interpretation seeks to measure the interpretation against a text
[traditional representation view]
a writerly interpretation is a deeply creative activity

it allows us to rebel against previous views and produce alternatives

influence upon Anglo-American (Analytic) Aesthetics

this view that the reader helps complete a work has entered deeply into the debate about interpretation in the Anglo-American tradition

Joseph Margolis also rejects the notion that there must be one true interpretation of a work of art
there are many plausible interpretations
and no neutral way of deciding between them
works of art are culturally constituted and thus inherently unstable

Novitz argues against this view

even if works of art are culturally emergent entities

one can evaluate the interpretation according to the conventions within which it is framed

“all that critics need to do in order to test their evaluation of a particular work is acquaint themselves with aspects of the relevant culture inhabited by the work, against which the properties of the work emerge” (162)

Postmodernist art

what is the connection between postmodern philosophy and postmodern art?

Modernism in art: works of art are individual, unique, objects of beauty created by imaginative endeavors of highly talented individuals

the idea of genius: some natural brilliance that enables those with outstanding talent to create original works of art

High Modernism: the essence of the visual and musical arts resides in their formal properties (Bell’s theory of significant form)

postmodernist art begins with an assault on the modernist boundaries of art

a refusal to see art as purely formal and as distinct from life

willingness to appropriate ready-made objects

Dadaism as the first postmodernist art movement

Novitz thinks one can appreciate the critique of modernism in art offered by postmodern art

without subscribing to the theories of postmodern philosophers like Derrida, Barthes, Margolis or Rorty

Novitz, David. “Postmodernism,” in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001.