

Chapter Four

Modernist and Postmodernist Fiction(s)

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1. Introduction: Terms and aims

The large body of critical work centred on modernism and postmodernism, which has seen the light of day in the twentieth century and the first years of the twentieth first, is simply impressive. What partly accounts for such extensive and ever proliferating critical responses to the two (cultural and aesthetic) movements may be connected, on one level at least, to the lack of consensus and the intense debate carried out among commentators with regard to their meaning and politics. As terms, modernism and postmodernism have infiltrated the professional idioms of a variety of disciplinary fields, from literature, art and philosophy to architecture, film and cultural analysis. They are, however, often interpreted multiply in their various contexts, decoded as they are in ways that address very specific, field-bound issues and problems. What is more, their definitional limits are further stretched by the ongoing revision to which they have been subjected since at least the 1970s, as new theoretical concerns come to bear on already established positions. For example, the recent interest in postcolonial studies and globalization has come to question modernism's cultural politics, especially its Eurocentric focus, by uncovering forms of non-Western art and literature that compete with James Joyce in their groundbreaking aesthetic innovations (Said; Moore-Gilbert; Cuddy-Keane). In like manner, postmodernism's encounter with feminism or the anxieties emanating from the new planetary order since 9/11 has refueled the debate regarding its politics. Is postmodernism the result and perpetrator of contemporary capitalist, consumerist, largely Western practices or a critical formation capable of reacting to their inbuilt injustices? Is it even worth posing these questions at this moment in history when, as a word and idea, postmodernism is considered (by some) passé and out of fashion? What might be fairly safely argued at this point is that there is no one single answer to these questions. Over the years, modernism and postmodernism have opened themselves up to multiple, often competing, mutually interrogating interpretations and evaluations, proving slippery and contentious as organizing categories and prompting commentators in the field to speak of "modernisms" and "postmodernisms" in the plural. This is certainly a gesture meant to register the diversity of positions that have been brought together under the names of the modern and the postmodern. At the same time, it also crucially underlines the extent to which non-uniformity, self-contradiction and lack of self-identity (one single and fixed identity) are central to what modernists and postmodernists do and the alternative representations of reality and the world that they offer.

In line with this view, in this chapter I will not provide all-encompassing definitions or a full account of the various modernisms and postmodernisms one is likely to encounter. I will offer, instead, a brief and selective introduction into their basic assumptions and aesthetic practices and suggest ways in which you can begin to orient yourselves in these ever-shifting spaces mostly by working my way through specific examples. My focus will be on literary (primarily fictional), artistic and cultural texts, with the odd theoretical essay thrown in, and will pay special emphasis on their relationship to notions of the real, the subject and the political (the texts' own ideological positions and engagement with the world we live in). Brief detours into the historical, cultural and intellectual forces that have framed and shaped literary and artistic production since the late nineteenth century will be carried out when necessary. Finally, I shall suggest reading paths which you can follow to reach more extensive analyses of the issues broached in this chapter.

In the discussion that follows, there are at least four cognate terms that rub shoulders and which this essay will spend time unpacking: modernity, modernism, postmodernity, postmodernism. How do they relate to each other? Do they share conceptual links, as their common etymological root suggests, or are they defined by a relationship of confrontation and mutually-launched challenges? Or both? And why do we need to know? As a starting point, it is worth noting that both "modernity" and "postmodernity" are frequently understood as terms that designate social, cultural and intellectual conditions, while "modernism" and "postmodernism" aesthetic phenomena.

Learning Objectives:

- ✓ *Focus on modernism, postmodernism, modernity, postmodernity.*
- ✓ *Investigate conceptions of the real, the subject and the political.*
- ✓ *Provide cultural, historical and social contexts.*
- ✓ *Suggest further reading.*

2. Modernity

To understand where modernist and postmodernist attempts at disturbing modes of representation emerge from, what they are reacting against and what aesthetic and ideological complexities they ultimately expose, it is vital to have some sense of the philosophical, political and cultural discourses that make up “modernity.” Modernity is at best a slippery term. It was first used by Charles Baudelaire in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) to describe “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” quality of modern living (13). It captures the sense of rapid and continual change that shape human life in the industrialized urban centres of the nineteenth century where novel technologies accelerate the speed of living and revise our notions of time and space. In fact, to be modern is to be confronted with the new in all fields of human activity, from science and philosophy to communication and travel. Modernity is a time of constant transformation that affects the human being’s self perception and relationship to nature and knowledge, leading to a distinctly modern conceptualization of the individual and the real (how we see the world around us). Locating its beginnings has proved notoriously difficult. There are critics who consider the eighteenth century and its revolutionary activity the founding moment of the modern. For many, however, modern times begin with the Renaissance, at the end of the Middle Ages, and find a culminating point in the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment (For more on the divisions of modernity see Berman). Would this mean, though, that there never was an age of transformation before the advent of the modern? Not quite. What characterizes modernity is not simply more change but a different *stance* towards the very idea of “change” which is now reappraised and taken to act, in the context of a highly valued rationalism, as the measure of what is human and civilised. Michel Foucault, the French historian and philosopher, rightly suggests that we think of modernity as an “attitude,” “a way of thinking and feeling,” and also a way of “acting and behaving,” rather than a historical period (39). Re-conceptualizing the modern as an attitude, rather than only an *époque*, opens the way for recognizing its

continuing impact on the present, and accepting that it lives on alongside and within postmodernity rather than lie buried safely in a past that no longer concerns us. In this line of thinking, the modern continues to shape how we relate to contemporary reality and how we think about both individual and collective identities (subjects and communities). It also explains the reason why modernist and postmodernist authors and artists have engaged with the beliefs and conflicts of the modern with such force and persistence—either to produce radical critiques of its foundational premises or to suggest “counter-modernities” as postcolonial critics Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy have both done.

2.1 Modernity’s Main Features: An Example

I will now turn to Roland Barthes’s essay “The Eiffel Tower” to unpack further the meanings implicit in modernity’s prioritization of reason, science and progress, especially as regards the different ontological (concerned with the nature of being) and epistemological (concerned with knowledge and truth) models that it puts forth and their involvement in aesthetic movements. For Barthes, the Eiffel Tower is not only the universal symbol of Paris but tellingly the symbol of “modernity, of communication, of science” (4).



Image 4.1 The Eiffel Tower. 15 May 1888: Start of construction of second stage

Built in 1889 by Gustave Eiffel for the Centennial Exposition in Paris, the tower is a monument to human ingenuity and innovative engineering, its thousands of steel plates, bolts, beams and screws constructing an empty structure whose main aim is to reach for the sky and allow Parisians to view the metropolitan landscape from a height of over 300 meters for the first time ever. In becoming the tallest building of the world in its time (324 m), the tower materializes and metaphorically captures the spirit of modernity in its desire to dream ahead, to move on, to fly high, or else to progress. Following Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History,” it turns its back on a landlocked past and the detritus of history to face the future with the newly acquired confidence of a world that has invested in the almost unlimited possibilities promised by new machines and technologies.

This only works to prove what commentators have consistently remarked about modernity. It is a period deeply marked by the emergence of new types of knowledge, sciences and inventions, from Galileo and Copernicus’s scientific revolutions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to steam trains and telephones in the nineteenth and satellites in the twentieth. What needs to be grasped at this point is that embedded in modernity’s scientific advances is a new way of relating to the world and a new position granted to the human being. Nature is no longer to be contemplated. It is to be investigated and explored. Isaac Newton is famously said to have needed to *inquire* into the causes that made an apple fall to the ground instead of flying skywards in order to formulate the law of gravity. Nature turns into an object of inquiry and experimentation, a book that must be analysed and explained. In this light, the Eiffel Tower may be said to embody modernity’s fullest expression. By allowing its visitors to enjoy a “bird’s eye view,” it gives birth to a “new sensibility of vision” and signals the advent of a new perception. Visitors are encouraged to “read” and “decipher” the world at their feet and to “see things in their *structure*” (9). In Barthes’s own words,

every visitor to the Tower makes structuralism without knowing it [...] in Paris spread out beneath him, he spontaneously distinguishes separate—because known—points—and yet does not stop linking them, perceiving them within a great functional space; in short he separates and groups; [...] What is, in fact, a panorama? An image we attempt to decipher, in which we try to recognize known sites, to identify landmarks.(9-10)



Image 4.2 Panoramic view from the Eiffel Tower.

Visitors to the tower, in other words, do not just “see” Paris. With the help of their “intelligence,” they “interpret” and make sense of it by means of identifying known landmarks (the Bois de Boulogne or the Arc de Triomphe) and the routes that connect them (roads, rivers), grouping, classifying and organizing the spectacle of Paris to satisfy the demand for immediate comprehensibility. Just as the job of modern scientists is to interrogate the world around them, to order it into categories based on data gleaned from experimentation and observation, to unearth and formulate rules and systems that underpin the laws of nature, visitors to the tower adopt the same modern gaze to render the cityscape, its life and history intelligible. As pointed out by Barthes, the panoramic vision that they are confronted with, and the experience of successfully orienting themselves in the city space before them, confers pleasure and “euphoria.” He suggests that this happens primarily for three reasons. First, the view from the top of the tower allows visitors to form a “continuous image of Paris” (10) which is the result of a process of “decipherment” (explanation) (10) that is complete, without any gaps. Visitors are in no doubt as to where they are in relation to Paris. Second, for this very reason, it offers the viewers a position of “superiority,” literally because they stand on a platform higher than anyone else but also intellectually because they have been proved to possess the mental and perceptual agility that puts them in charge of the spectacle. Paris has been “confronted” and “possessed” (14) by visitors that are installed in the position of “subjects who know” and can control their knowledge of themselves and the world around them. Finally, the tower’s panoramic vision causes euphoria because it places the observer “outside” the spectacle under observation and underscores his position of power over a world that is impacted upon and hence discursively framed and contained without being able to return the gaze. As Barthes writes in the essay’s closing line, at the top of the Eiffel Tower “one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the *owner* of a world” (my emphasis, 17).

This last example, and Barthes’s essay as a whole, clearly suggests that the questioning, scientific “attitude” towards the world fostered in modernity is underpinned by a re-conceptualization of the human as all powerful centre of the universe (in his “new” position at the top of the Tower), confirmed in his knowledge of himself and his surroundings, a self-present agent that acts upon and (mentally) “owns” the spectacle of the real. It is fair to claim that the modern subject comes across as a true “individual,” a self that has an “undivided” experience of itself in relation to others. This means that there are no doubts, gaps or ruptures in his knowledge of who or where he is and he can be said, therefore, to inhabit the space of a “unified” and “coherent” identity. What fuels this empowering articulation of subjectivity, often referred to as “modern individualism,” is the belief in the power of human intelligence to control the self and the world with the help of reason. Modernity is regularly associated with the rise of rationalism that finds its finest expression in the works of Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant. When French philosopher René Descartes writes in *Discourse of Method* “I existed without doubt, by the fact that I was persuaded, or indeed by the mere fact that I thought at all [...] *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind” (103), he gives voice to the modern conviction that to be human is to be able to exercise reason. Rather than being conceived as the product of external, usually divine, forces and plans—

which was the dominant view of the human until the Renaissance—the modern subject is staged as the measure of all things, in charge of his destiny and a key agent in the development of knowledge. In Enlightenment humanist discourses, human-ness becomes intimately bound to the exercise of the subject's rational faculty and, through it, to structures of knowledge, so much so that the Self is taken to be a function not so much of *what* the human being knows as of the *way* in which he knows things (Gandhi 29). This close connection that exists between structures of modern epistemology (how we know the world) and subjectivity (who we are) has had serious implications, over the last few centuries, not only for political, social and cultural life in Europe and North America but also for aesthetic production.

Re-Cap:

Modernity:

- ✓ *Values reason.*
- ✓ *Is marked by advances in technology and the birth of sciences.*
- ✓ *Valorizes progress.*

2.2 The Politics of Modernity

As regards the impact of modern discourses on social and political life, suffice it to point out that the modern re-casting of humanity as the source of meaning and action in the world fueled and sustained a widely shared representation of the individual (subject) as inherently valuable. This led to the emergence of emancipatory discourses that worked to protect and improve human existence. Science changed not only the way humans viewed the world or, as we have just seen, the notion of the human itself but also transformed the way societies worked, their political systems and social possibilities. The scientific discontent with the self-evident in nature was translated into political and social dissent and anti-authoritarian struggle. Ideas about progress, universal justice, individual freedom and emancipation, as expressed by philosophers and political thinkers from Kant to Karl Marx, were enlisted to challenge social, political and religious injustice, initiating revolutions that saw the end of absolute monarchy, the rise of parliamentarianism, the curtailing of the church's power, increased civil rights for larger classes of people, the gradual democratization of a world that became gradually transformed beyond recognition in the name of human progress.

Modernity's emancipatory project has had its defenders and critics. Key among its recent supporters is the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas who explains the current problems attendant on the fragmentation and the commodification of life brought about by contemporary global capitalism by arguing that modernity's aims have not yet been fully realized. In his view, universal emancipation is still a vital part of political

critique and modernity an unfinished project (Habermas; Malpas, *Lyotard* 37, *The Postmodern* 51-55). At the other end, postmodern thinker Jean-François Lyotard challenged the premises of modern discourses, their classificatory gaze and desire to create all-explaining systems of thought—what he called “grand narratives”—which, in his view, inevitably led to the exclusion of marginal perspectives (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*). Lyotard is not alone in his critical reading of modernity. His critique is in line with (though not identical to) early-twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde denunciation of modern rationalism but also with a number of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century feminist and especially postcolonial thinkers who have identified the central role race has played in modernization and the ways in which modern (and contemporary) racial hierarchies and the idea of white supremacy are rooted in the Enlightenment’s valorization of rationality (for more on modernity’s racial ideas see West and Nadell). We must not forget that parallel to their struggle for progress and emancipation, Europeans engaged in the infamous slave trade for three hundred years (it ended in 1807) and spent the nineteenth and twentieth centuries building colonial Empires on the strength not only of military prowess but, crucially, a set of ideological assumptions that promoted the “scientifically” proven and “objectively” verified superiority of the white race over other races, some of which were codified as non-human. The idea of white supremacy, as the African-American philosopher and activist Cornel West remarks, is “endemic to the very structure of modern discourse” (47). His claim explains the longevity and enormous impact of (scientific) racism on life and thought in the West over the last few centuries and at once uncovers a major paradox in the conceptual make up of the modern.

2.3 Modern Aesthetics: Realism

In the field of aesthetic production, modernity has found its most expressive manifestation in the ideologies of realism which have dominated literary and artistic creation since the eighteenth century. Realism’s complexity, multifaceted character and radical potential have already been presented in an earlier chapter in this book. For the moment, what merits consideration, as it stands to shed light on why modernists and postmodernists critiqued it so rigorously, is the extent to which realism embodies the “gaze” of modernity in its writing conventions and textual workings. What also needs to be grasped is that the term, when employed especially by its postmodernist critics, alludes to a mode of representation (of the real) that exceeds the historical and generic bounds of the nineteenth-century realist novel. It extends into contemporary popular culture to encompass present-day soap operas, TV games or news programmes which continue to enact realism’s fundamental principles by offering narratives about the world that insist on comprehensibility, closure, structural order and empowerment for readers. Life likeness is perhaps realism’s most commented upon attribute. The standard academic view of realism, also voiced by many of its practitioners, draws attention to its mimetic and reflectionist impulse, its desire, as it were, to provide an unmediated access to the real in ways that sustain verisimilitude. It is worth remembering that the classic metaphor regularly used to describe realism’s effects is that of the open window. The world of objects depicted realistically on a canvas or coming alive through the words on a page is likened to the world outside one’s open window. Standing by the window frame, the subject-spectator-reader observes that world uninterrupted, undetected and, as a true “voyeur,” unacknowledged by the life outside that continues its course indifferent to his presence (Jay 184). What underlies this popular understanding of the text-world relationship in realism is the assumption that the realist text offers readers immediate access to its textual universe. Nothing impedes their vision, allowing them to become absorbed into the workings of the plot.

Poststructuralist and postmodernist readers of realism have been quick to identify the fallacy implicit in this position, calling it an illusion and a “fantasy” (Lyotard, “Answering the Question” 74). In their view, realism does not so much give us reality as “make” the world appear real (Malpas, *Jean-François* 44). This is achieved in two ways. First, realism effaces its own textuality; it “offers itself as transparent” (Belsey 51) by not calling attention to its own textual processes and language tools. Second, it creates a sense of recognizable reality by recycling familiar knowledge about the world. Realism assembles its juxtapositions and complexities “out of what we already know, and it is for this reason that we experience it as realistic” (Belsey 51). Even when readers are confronted with surprises in action, twists, contradictions or changes of codes (the life-like turned fantastic), the experience of reading a realist text is ultimately reassuring, according to Jean-François Lyotard, as one of its key aims is “to preserve various consciousnesses from doubt.” Its objective is “to stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable

meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images and sequences quickly, and so arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity” (*The Postmodern* 74). Lyotard draws attention here to realism’s desire to create positions of intelligibility for its readers that promote comprehensibility both of the world and the self by presenting what is already known either in terms of shared knowledge about real-life situations (for example, spatial, temporal or human relations) or generic rules (in writing these would include a linear narrative structure, decipherable characters, largely reliable narrators and a final resolution). The reader is ultimately reassured about his knowledge of the world and his own identity and, in this sense, is shown to adopt the “gaze” of modernity, figuratively placed at the top of the Eiffel Tower. He is encouraged, by the conventions of realism, to organize the text before him into a “connected space” (Barthes 10) in a way that confers a sense of “euphoria” on him for having proved his decoding skills and knowledge of the (social or narrative) system correct. As we shall see next, the Eiffel Tower seat, and by extension realism’s inscription of modern epistemology in its textual workings, is one that most modernists did not care to occupy. They set out, in fact, to blow it up with the force accorded them by their violent, provocatively disjointed and complex creative styles.

3. Modernism

3.1 The Principal Assumptions

Modernism is regarded as an aesthetic and cultural reaction to modernity and modernization which is international and interdisciplinary in character. It is part of the modern, sharing in its unabated enthusiasm for the new, for change and experimentation, and directing its energies towards the future. It is also, however, at once often critical of modernity’s certainties and ambivalent about its investment in rationalism and all its byproducts: technological advancement, industrialization, urbanization, new forms of mass communication and entertainment, speed and travel, the very notion of progress itself (in time, space, society and even the text). It is a historically specific movement which made its appearance roughly between the end of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century in a number of international centres, from Berlin and Vienna to Paris, New York and London (more on modernism’s internationalism in Bradbury and McFarlane).

As a term, it became widely used in the 1960s to designate retrospectively work produced in a variety of fields—including literature, art, music and architecture—by groups of writers and artists who shared a commitment to formal experimentation and radical stylistic innovation but who were frequently at odds with each other in their professed intellectual objectives and ideological responses to key historical events and forces of the

Modernist Art:

*Modernist art is, in most critical usage, reckoned to be the art of what Harold Rosenberg calls “the tradition of the new.” It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist’s freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster [...] [T]here are several modernisms: an intensifying sequence of movements from Symbolism on (Post-impressionism, Expressionism, Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism) often radically at odds, and sharp differences of cultural interpretation coming from writers apparently stylistically analogous (e.g. T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams). Modernism means the ruffling of the realistic surface of literature by underlying forces; the disturbance may arise, though, from logics solely aesthetic or highly social. Hence, modernism still remains a loose label. We can dispute about when it starts (French symbolism; decadence; the break-up of naturalism) and when it ends (Kermode distinguishes “paleo-modernism” and “neo-modernism” and hence a degree of continuity through to postwar art). We can regard it as a timebound concept (say 1890-1930) or a timeless one (including Sterne, Donne, Villon, Ronsard). The best focus remains a body of major writers (James, Conrad, Proust, Mann, Gide, Kafka, Svevo, Joyce, Musil, Faulkner in fiction; Strindberg, Pirandello, Wedekind, Brecht in drama; Mallarmé, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Rilke, Apollinaire, Stevens in poetry) whose works are aesthetically radical, contain striking technical innovation, emphasize spatial or “fugal” as opposed to chronological form, tend towards ironic modes, and involve a certain “dehumanization of art”. (Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* 145)*

period (as in the cases of World War I and Fascism) or forms of social transformation (for example, the development of mass culture or the women's suffrage). Notable, in this light, is the case of the avant-garde movements, which many critics believe modernism to encompass, whose views on art and life were at times underpinned by conflictual ideological orientations. While Filippo Marinetti's Futurists, for example, idolized technology and speed, André Breton and the Surrealists lamented the hold of reason on human imagination, a difference in their attitude to modern rationalism that calls attention to the discrepant languages that the modernists often spoke (more on Modernisms in Armstrong and Nicholls and Kolokotroni for the manifestos).

What this example points to, on one level, is the arbitrariness involved in any act of literary and canonical periodisation while also illustrating, in parallel, the heterogeneous and plural character of the movement. At the same time, however, it allows us a glimpse into the aesthetic and ideological struggles that took place in the process of producing an identifiable modernist sensibility that relies for its identity on the very ideas of dissent and contestation. For, if one would wish to identify a recurring feature within modernism, in its various guises, that would be its attempt to break with dominant aesthetic and social rules and its desire to develop alternative representational codes. Confronted with the catastrophic effects of a the First World War (WWI), the emergence of feminism, the spread of European colonial empires and intensified labour struggles in the early years of the twentieth century, modernists lived through and responded to a crisis in values that led to the erosion of Victorian certainties, especially as inscribed in realist works. They felt that conventional representational patterns could no longer be trusted to get to the truth of their rapidly transforming age. Over against the comforting familiarity afforded by Realism, they pitted their discordant, dissonant, alienating visions. Central to their radically anti-representationalist aesthetic outlook is their desire for formal innovation and technical experimentation with language, time, space, character construction and perspective. It is through texts that are almost routinely branded complex, obscure and disorienting that modernists conduct a sustained inquiry into the certainty of reality and the role of art in meaning-making processes. At the same time, they register their deep skepticism towards the idea of the unified, self-present human subject through their efforts to represent individual consciousness and in their concern with introspection and psychology.

Futurism:

The most important Italian avant-garde art movement of the 20th century, Futurism celebrated advanced technology and urban modernity. Committed to the new, its members wished to destroy older forms of culture and to demonstrate the beauty of modern life – the beauty of the machine, speed, violence and change. Futurism was first announced on February 20, 1909, when the Paris newspaper Le Figaro published a manifesto by the Italian poet and editor Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Marinetti coined the word Futurism to reflect his goal of discarding the art of the past and celebrating change, originality, and innovation in culture and society. Marinetti's manifesto glorified the new technology of the automobile and the beauty of its speed, power, and movement. Exalting violence and conflict, he called for the sweeping repudiation of traditional values and the destruction of cultural institutions such as museums and libraries. The futurists' enthusiasm for modernity and the machine ultimately led them to celebrate the arrival of World War I. By its end, the group's influence as an important avant-garde was significantly reduced, though it continued through the 1920s, and, during that time several of its members went on to embrace Fascism, making Futurism the only twentieth century avant-garde to have embraced far right politics.

Encyclopedia Britannica & The Art Story

3.2 Modernist Epistemology: The Turn Inwards

To explore how some of these key modernist assumptions become articulated in the field of literature, I would now like to turn to a fictional narration that is thought to constitute one of the earliest examples of modernist writing in English. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) tells the story of Charlie Marlow who travels to the African state of Congo, a Belgian colony at the end of the nineteenth century, to take a steamboat up the river Congo in search of ivory and the elusive ivory trader Mr. Kurtz. The account of Marlow's encounter

with cultural difference at the “heart of darkness” calls attention to the novel’s preoccupation with the ethics of nineteenth-century European imperialism and the ultimately ambivalent and suspect politics underpinning the construction of traditionally opposed categories such as civilization and savagery, interiority and exteriority, self and other. Interestingly enough, for our purposes, the narrative allies its cultural critique with the challenge it extends to the ability of either language or human perception to record the real with absolute certainty. The Africans’ harsh living conditions under colonialism and Europe’s exploitative relationship to the natives’ land are presented to the reader through recourse to Marlow’s primitivist fantasies about the, at once, repellent and alluring dark continent, his thoughts and emotional responses as he endeavours to map out the African

darkness and his own self. That the novel ultimately waters down its critique by revealing itself to be shot through with dominant racialist discourses of the nineteenth century should not detract from the fact that it conducts an exciting epistemological shift in the representation of the real. It transfers attention from the object (outer) world to the inner space of the mind and undermines in this move the fantasy of clear vision (of the world) structuring both Realism and modern epistemology. I shall quote here and briefly comment upon a short passage from the novel in which the question of knowledge is a vital concern.

Stream of Consciousness:

is a narrative technique which seeks to record the random and apparently illogical flow of impressions passing through a character’s mind. The term was coined by William James in 1890 in The Principles of Psychology and the best known English exponents are Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

Joseph Conrad, from *Heart of Darkness*

I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie. You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose. Well, I went near enough to it by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see—you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. ...”

He was silent for a while.

“... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone ...”

He paused again as if reflecting, then added:

“Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know ...”

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river. (1778-79)

This is a passage that disputes the priority accorded to visuality in modernity and the structures of absolute knowledge that it lends support to. It presents Marlow as an uncertain narrator who doubts his ability “to see” the events and characters of his story with clarity. Through his repetitive, almost obsessive questioning, of visual intelligibility (“Do you see?”), Marlow voices his anxiety about the possibility of ever attaining full knowledge of his world, his past and his own self. Unlike the modern subject’s visual control over the spectacle of the real, Marlow’s interpretive faculties appear numbed. He is unsure as to how much he can remember or understand about his journey, about Kurtz, who remains inscrutable to the end, or the rest of the Pilgrims. His narrative conveys a “dream-sensation,” flowing backwards and forwards in time, rather than construct itself as a logically-connected, coherent representational space. To “tell a dream,” Conrad deploys, here as elsewhere in the novel, key modernist techniques such as stream-of-consciousness, tunneling and interior monologue. These are writing tools widely used across modernist fiction and employed here to represent the workings of Marlow’s mind at the moment of contact with the real, to register, as it were, his attempts at sense-making which often take the form of blurred, unconnected impressions and memories. The novel’s entire structure is, in fact, designed to enact this “dream sensation.” It consists of a series of relayed narratives that begin their journey from the mouths of characters whose testimony relies on moments when they “fancied” they could see things (1774), such as the Russian sailor, pass through to Marlow’s uncertain narration to finally reach an unnamed narrator’s pen. This is an invaginated narrative structure that exposes the complexity surrounding the notions of truth and falsehood, almost always enmeshed in attempts to delimit the borders of the factual, and makes truth detection into a process that guides readers slowly into the inner recesses of the perceiving subject’s consciousness, in search of a reality that recedes and fades. As Marlow muses at another point in the text, “the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily” (1784).

As a final comment on the passage above, what merits consideration is the “faint uneasiness inspired” by Marlow’s narrative in his listeners and readers alike. The darkness that slowly descends over the river Thames and Marlow’s companions literalises the challenge that his obscure narrative poses to their vision and understanding, causing the uneasiness resulting from the lack of complete knowledge to replace “euphoria” and self-contentment. As a piece of modernist literature, *Heart of Darkness* invites reading positions that dispense with readers as “subjects who know” and confronts them with what exceeds the visible bounds of immediate comprehension. There is a politics to this readerly uneasiness (caused by the text’s gaps and ruptures) which goes beyond being a self-indulgent game in textual self-consciousness. Conrad’s novel initiates new contact points among the text, the subject and the world by engaging with the cultural and historical discourses of its time in a way that emphasizes the processes and failings of perception and the inadvisability of prizing apart the real and the psychic. One might argue that part of his novel’s anti-imperialist critique derives its energy precisely from the very epistemological uncertainty it produces, which invites readers to attend to the necessity of rethinking the cultural “certainties” that are foundational to forms of white supremacy and modern racism in late nineteenth century Europe.

As it has been suggested so far, modernism’s desire to develop representational alternatives rests on the belief that reality is not external to the subject but always already internally defined. Many of the stylistic features encountered in the fiction of modernist authors, from Katherine Mansfield to D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, are directly related to their fascination with introspection. Virginia Woolf provides a theoretical elaboration of this shared belief when, in her seminal essay “Modern Fiction,” she allies her understanding of the real as a “semi-transparent envelope” with the need to formulate a new literary aesthetic. If life, or spirit, “is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged” but a “luminous halo [...] surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end,” as she argues, then the job of fiction is to “convey this [...] unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” and the job of the novelist to invent a fictional idiom, other than realism’s, capable of recording “the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall [...] disconnected and incoherent” (1924). Clearly acquainted with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories that are widely debated across the intellectual circles of modernism in the first half of the twentieth century, Woolf abandons the poetics of realism to urge fellow authors to initiate a style of writing which, in its fragmentation and discontinuities, seems strangely enough truer to life.

The stream-of-consciousness style and interior monologues are fictional techniques which are developed exactly as a response to the demand that fiction represents “moments of being” and impressions in the disconnected order in which they are perceived rather than offer a linear, causal narrative made out of objectively verified facts. They are well-suited, in this sense, to posing a challenge to our modern vision. Woolf makes extensive use of interior monologues in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse* to

encourage a revision of Victorian gender structures, as does Dorothy Richardson in *Pilgrimage*, while James Joyce journeys into, and through, the mind of his protagonist Stephen Dedalus to make a comment on Irish culture and its divisive nationalist and religious politics in the early twentieth century.

The modernist interest in the invisible realities of the mind is also vividly registered in the field of visual art. Avant-garde movements such as Surrealism and Dadaism, in particular, turn their backs on pictorial realism and employ Freudian symbols to represent the unconscious, to depict dreams and hallucinations. Salvador Dali's Surrealist painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) depicts a seaside landscape that does not aspire to life-likeness, only remotely resembling his native Catalonia in the depiction of the distant golden cliffs.

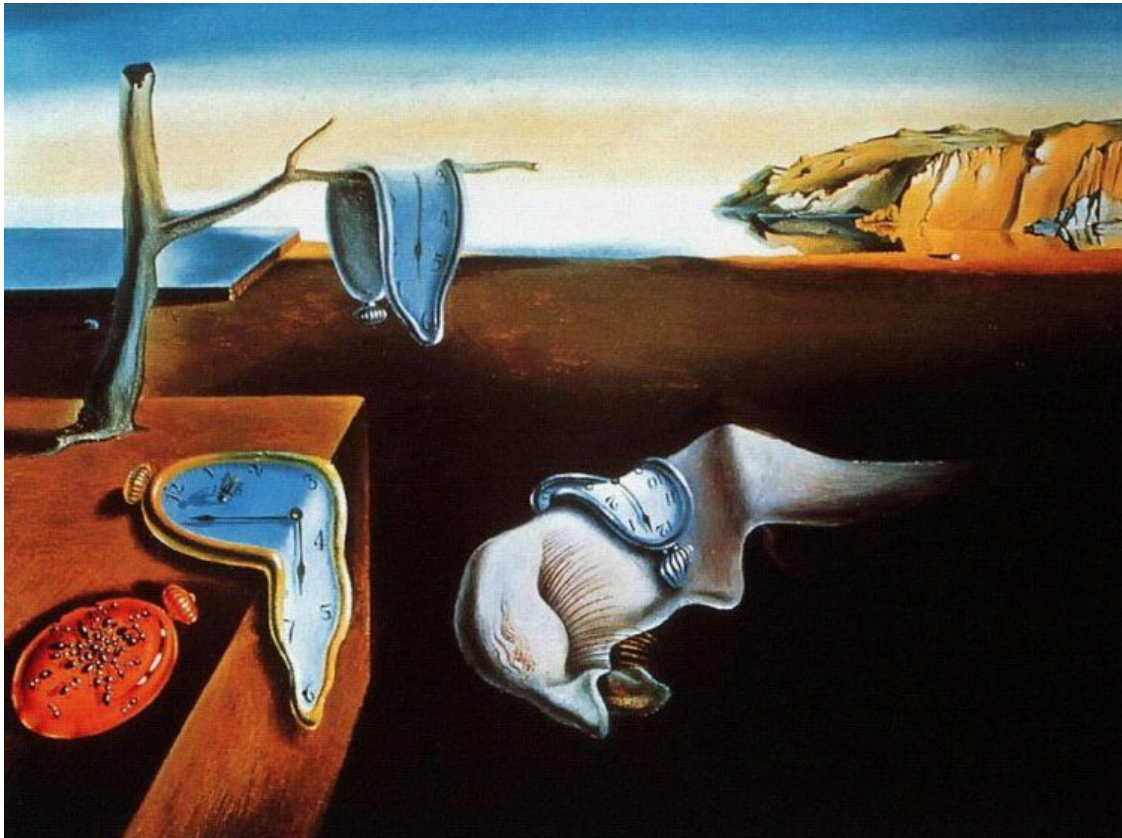


Image 4.3 Salvador Dali. *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Oil on canvas. MoMA.

His painting confronts us, rather, with fragments—ants, melting clocks and an unidentifiable, deformed creature in a state of sleep—which are drawn from Dali's imagination. It is fair to say that their function is more symbolic than literal as there are no immediately visible connections between them and their surroundings and no meaningful narrative that can be construed in relation to them upon first making eye contact with the painting. They seem more as having come out of a dream—Dali having described his paintings as “hand painted dream photographs” (https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/1168-2)—or as depicting a dream state which is clearly suggested by the slumbering creature. If melting clocks and ants allude to time and decay as central concerns in this painting, dream time, which is amorphous, unconnected, bearing the flowing traces of memories and experiences, seems to be invoked here to destabilize, even collapse, our sense of an orderly, daily temporal and spatial reality.

The Surrealists were not alone in exploring the psychic by way of investigating the intricacies of time. Modernists across the arts worked persistently with notions of uneven temporality influenced as they were especially by Henri Bergson's ideas on time. They were concerned with the claustrophobic hold of consumer, capitalist time on everyday life but also eager to develop formal tools to represent the existence of overlapping or competing temporalities particularly as illustrated in the case of the temporally *split subject*—when psychic time (taken up by memories and thoughts) runs parallel to, intervenes in, but is not identical with, “external” time (for more on modernism and time see Armstrong). In the field of literature, Virginia Woolf offers a good example of a writer who, like Dali, foregrounds the complexity of time through her focus on the subject's psychology. With the help of interior monologues that allow readers to hop from one character's consciousness to another's, she contrasts public with private time experienced by a character (and a reader) as being long-lasting but have actually taken a minute in the “public” time of the narrative. It is noteworthy that, in the second part of her novel *To the Lighthouse* (where the effects of the First World War on the Ramsay family are made known), Woolf reverses the conventional temporal scheme, prioritising emotional responses to the war and subjective time at the expense of “facts” that belong to public life (battles and the deaths of family members) which are given almost in passing in square brackets. By reversing established priorities in the representation of temporality, the novel foregrounds the existence of parallel realities and suggests the importance of psychic life not only in understanding the individual subject but also social relations.

3.3 Language and Representation in Modernism

Language and representation are central to the modernist sensibility as already suggested. Formal experimentation is a vital aspect of modernism's aesthetics partly because its re-conceptualisation of the real encouraged the invention of new forms of expression and partly because new ideas regarding language and the role of art made their appearance in the first half of the twentieth century. Whether accused of having lost its ability to deliver the truth (when World War I propaganda was revealed) or its transparency, as an immediate

Henri Bergson (1859-1941):

French philosopher who in Time and Free Will (1889) maintained that facts and matter, which are the objects of discursive reason, are only the outer surface that has to be penetrated by intuition in order to achieve a vision in depth of reality. He distinguished between chronological time, the time of history (hours, minutes and seconds), and duration, the varying speed at which the mind apprehends experiences according to their intensity and meaning for the individual which is not necessarily identical with chronological time. His work changed the way Modernists represented time in fiction.
(Childs 49)

(Childs 171). Thirty pages of private thoughts may be

Surrealism:

originated in the late 1910s and early 1920s as a literary movement that experimented with a new mode of expression called automatic writing, or automatism, which sought to release the unbridled imagination of the subconscious. Officially consecrated in Paris in 1924 with the publication of the Manifesto of Surrealism by the poet and critic André Breton (1896-1966), Surrealism became an international intellectual and political movement. Breton, a trained psychiatrist, along with French poets Louis Aragon (1897-1982), Paul Éluard (1895-1952), and Philippe Soupault (1897-1990), were influenced by the psychological theories and dream studies of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and the political ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883). Using Freudian methods of free association, their poetry and prose drew upon the private world of the mind, traditionally restricted by reason and societal limitations, to produce surprising, unexpected imagery. The cerebral and irrational tenets of Surrealism find their ancestry in the clever and whimsical disregard for tradition fostered by Dadaism a decade earlier.
James Voorhies,
[The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York](#)

result of Ferdinand de Saussure's new linguistic theories,

language became so ineluctably connected to notions of truth and the real that any discussion about the world made engagement with language a necessity. I shall briefly discuss here the opening pages of James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as example of modernist fiction that calls attention to the workings of language in a literary text, and its role in constructions of the subject and the world, through its discontinuous and fragmented form.

James Joyce, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo [...] His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face. He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.

*O, the wild rose blossoms
On the little green place.*

He sang that song. That was his song.

O, the green wothe botheth.

When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell.

His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance. He danced:

*Tralala lala,
Tralala tralaladdy,
Tralala lala,
Tralala lala.*

Uncle Charles and Dante clapped. They were older than his father and mother but uncle Charles was older than Dante.

Dante had two brushes in her press. The brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the green velvet back was for Parnell. Dante gave him a cachou every time he brought her a piece of tissue paper.

The Vances lived in number seven. They had a different father and mother. They were Eileen's father and mother. When they were grown up he was going to marry Eileen. He hid under the table. His mother said:

—O, Stephen will apologize.

Dante said:

—O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes.—

*Pull out his eyes,
Apologize,
Apologize,
Pull out his eyes.
Apologize,
Pull out his eyes,
Pull out his eyes,
Apologize.*

This is admittedly compact modernist prose, ruptured and difficult to get into. Joyce's opening offers us a series of disconnected images by way of an introduction rather than clear contextual information on his Irish protagonist Stephen Dedalus and his family: a father reading a bedtime story to his baby son; a baby boy wetting his bed; a mother playing the piano; Dante threatening a young Stephen who finds solace in translating her threats into a song. Clearly experimenting with the representation of the real, the fragmented vision of Stephen's early life succeeds in highlighting the importance of language and storytelling in conveying ideas about characters and their world. The text attracts interest to the question of representation in a number of ways. For one, the chapter opens with a story. Baby Stephen identifies with "baby tuckoo," the main character in the story his father is reading to him, and so is shown to become aware of his existence with the help of a fictional construction. Almost deliberately, Joyce's artistic portrait insists on underlining the mediating role of storytelling in one's self-understanding and identity formation from its very first lines. Second, the text mimics the embryonic prattle of baby Stephen as a way of articulating his perspective. It attempts to dramatise Stephen's consciousness through the deployment of infantile language. The use of simple and babyish vocabulary ("moocow"), abrupt and arbitrary juxtapositions verbally represent baby Stephen's perception of his surroundings. This is a writing strategy that Joyce will repeat in the course of the novel to convey information about Stephen's thoughts and state of mind while he is growing up, suggesting thus strongly the existence of a vital connection between subjective perception and representation.

Finally, the very elliptical structure of the passage—the missing ties amongst images and characters that prevent immediate comprehension—not only causes confusion in readers but encourages us to think about reality (Stephen's and the text's) as interpretable material, as representation. As readers, we need to read on to find out more about nationalist politics in early-twentieth century Ireland, religious conflicts and family relations before we can make sense of this first chapter. The allusion to the nationalist leaders Michael Davitt and Charles Parnell or the panic caused in Dante by the mere suggestion that Stephen might get married to the Protestant neighbour Eileen Vance acquire meaning in retrospect and only after we have learned more about the ugly divisions scarring Stephen's family (Mr. Dedalus and Mr. Casey vs. Dante) and Irish society as a whole (Catholics vs. Protestants; Catholics vs. nationalists and Charles Parnell and so on). In other words, negotiating the gaps in meaning that mark the first chapter requires that we return to it to supply meaning. Through this act of repetition, which is at once a form of readerly alienation, Joyce's modernist text foregrounds its standing as decodable material, as a system of signs that *require* interpretation and are not naturally endowed with meaning. No longer an automatic act of decoding, the reading response that Joyce's novel invites is self-aware and ready to acknowledge the importance of language in our contact with reality, its immense possibilities and inbuilt potential for disturbing the old. The opening pages set the tone for what is to be a rather different portrait of an artist in the making, Stephen's character being presented throughout as an assembly of fragments, conflicting thoughts, writings and feelings that he experiences about himself, his awakening sexuality, his religious conversion and his love of country.

To produce Stephen's disjointed portrait, Joyce seems to borrow from the language of Cubism which foregrounds the ideas of collage and multiple, often juxtaposed, perspectives.



Image 4.4 Pablo Picasso. *Maya with her Doll* (1938).

Pablo Picasso's portrait of his daughter *Maya with her Doll* (1938) illustrates amply the discontinuity resulting from the simultaneous coexistence of opposed perspectives. The girl's face is represented in profile and forward facing at once, her head unnaturally enlarged, her legs positioned at a bizarre angle in relation to her body. Rather than produce a recognizable impression of his daughter, Picasso creates a painting that flaunts its artificiality and speaks through—and almost in a self-absorbed way *about*—its lines, shapes and colours. It is underwritten by the assumption that the world can no longer be regarded from one single perspective or its meanings contained in a single posture, script or language.

For the modernists, this doubleness of vision is foundational to their understanding of the world as fundamentally uncertain and is the result of different but interlocking historical and intellectual forces that are at work around the turn of the twentieth century: World War I, as the most destructive war ever, has eroded faith in the stability of life and the ability of language to tell the truth; Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) has undermined belief in the divine by proclaiming that “God is dead” and dismissed the existence of absolute truth; Freud and psychoanalysis have reinvented the subject as divided, not all knowing, because always determined by the unconscious which evades his control; Karl Marx (1818-1883), in his turn, has exposed the historically conditioned, hence transformable, nature of identity through his attention to capitalist modes of production and their role in the construction of the bourgeois subject; even science has brought about a paradigm shift in understandings of the physical universe, Albert Einstein overturning Newtonian physics through his Theory of Relativity and Werner Heisenberg undermining the possibility of ever knowing anything about the material universe with absolute certainty through his Uncertainty Principle (for more on the forces around modernism see Childs and Bradshaw & Dettmar).

The challenge posed by all these discourses to the clear vision of a calculable world is immense. It is little surprise then that language itself, whose job was traditionally to render what surrounds us visible, is seen by many modernists as being in crisis, unable to turn such a rapidly, and often, violently transformed reality into meaningful signs. Its transparency gone, language now figures as a land that invites exploration, its limits and its potential needing to be reconfigured, which is what the modernists do when they play with form, perspective and means of expression.

What should be made clear at this point is that key amongst the intellectual forces that motivate the modernist penchant for language games and formal innovation is a set of linguistic and philosophical ideas about language that come into effect and are widely debated across literary circles in the first half of the

twentieth century. It has been already suggested in previous chapters that the emergence of symbolism in late nineteenth century was instrumental in uncovering the plurality inherent in the structures of language (a *heart* may have more than one meaning as a symbol) and contributed to the severing of the bond between the word and the thing it designates. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure cut this bond for good by proposing, in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), that language is both arbitrary and relational. In other words, there is no natural link connecting the (concept of an) object in the real world and their lexical sound (it is totally arbitrary why we call a chair *chair*); second, signs produce meaning because of their difference from each other in a network of signs which is the signifying system and not because meaning is divinely conferred (Belsey 136)—*red*, as a sign, may mean erotically desirable in a romantic story but threateningly violent in a vampire film.

The reason why Saussure's theories of language are important to modernists and postmodernists alike is because they foreground meaning as not naturally given but as constructed (socially or psychically), plural and contextual. What also merits a mention in this context is that close to the time when Saussure makes his linguistic theories public, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein also formulates philosophies of language which contribute to a reevaluation of the relationship between reality and meaning-making. Wittgenstein believes that our physical ways of being, over which we have no choice, are distinguished and identified by our words, our ability to speak, by particular language games. Naming, that is language, is what allows us to access what he calls "forms of life" and make it signify (Fleming 566). Given the promising insights implicit in these formulations and their impact on intellectual life, it is not surprising that, for many writers and artists, language is now a space where one can intervene in the representation of the real and the social. Specifically for the modernists, language itself becomes a new form whose limits must be investigated and are regularly stretched beyond recognition to discover its potential. Note, for example, Giacomo Balla's painting *Abstract Speed: The Car Has Passed* (1913).



Image 4.5 Giacomo Balla. *Abstract Speed—The Car has Passed* (1913). Oil paint on canvas. Tate Liverpool.

The theme of the painting is “the passage of a car along a white road, with green and blue forms, evoking earth and sky, in the background. The pinkish areas in this painting suggest the exhaust fumes left by the

passing car” (for more on Balla’s painting see [here](#)). Attention to verisimilitude has been replaced by abstract lines and colour schemes that speak to the viewer in ways that are not definite but which convey the explosive energy of the modern, the new. In a sense, form itself figures as the subject of this openly anti-representational painting, treated as a new language that is designed to communicate a new vision which, in its turn, signifies on more than one level. In a similar register, Joyce’s novel too signifies on more than one level, deploying the plurality inherent in representation to level its critique against the cultural conventions and stifling identities dominant in early-twentieth century Ireland. His protagonist develops a modernist sensibility as an artist and transforms the word into a site of experimentation and resistance to the given.

3.4 The Politics of Modernist Form

What I have suggested through this very brief reading of Joyce is what Michael Levenson also subscribes to when he remarks that attention to “form” need not be necessarily opposed to “content” (3). Levenson challenges here a rather pervasive reading of modernism as a solipsistic, formalist aesthetic movement that obsessively pursues formal innovation for its sake, concentrates on the individual rather than society and is, therefore, removed from real life. This line of argumentation can be traced back to the hostility expressed towards modernism by a group of Marxist critics in the years before World War II, a position famously represented by the Hungarian critic Georg Lucács (in his quarrel especially with his fellow Marxist, the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht). Lucács believed that the Modernists’ interest in the psychic and spiritual life of the subject is premised on a lack of concern with the material conditions of living and with history. This renders them, and their fictional creations, asocial, ahistorical and unable to act upon society or be acted upon by it (477). In his view, only realist aesthetics is well placed to stimulate social change because political action can only be the work of a coherently conceived subject in an epistemologically determinate universe.

Lucács’s argument has proved influential and has lived on in contemporary criticisms leveled against the various strands of modernism—and more generally experimental fiction and art—even today. It is, however, important to remember that the last thirty years have witnessed a sustained reevaluation of modernist texts and their politics that firmly connects them to their social and cultural contexts. This is a claim that might be taken to suggest, on one level, the influence social, historical and cultural circumstances had in the development of modernism’s formal attributes. As I have already suggested, epistemological uncertainty encouraged writers and artists to experiment with perspective on the canvas (as Picasso did), or on the page through the development of writing techniques, such as the stream of consciousness, which represented life through a different lens. Levenson argues in a similar vein that the social cataclysms of the early twentieth century penetrated modernist invention and gave writers and artists *forms* suggested by industrial machinery, the chuffing of cars (consider Balla’s abstract representation of speed) or, most horribly, the bodies broken from war (4).

At the same time, however, modernists also used narrative form to transform the worlds in which they existed. Notable is the case of women modernists who not only employed but actively developed modernist writing strategies that allowed them to react both against the conventions of realism and the metaphysics of gender oppression dominant in Victorian England—which many felt were embodied in realism’s formulations. Characteristically, Dorothy Richardson openly identified realism’s masculinist bias when she claimed in her “Foreword” to *Pilgrimage* that, while surveying the existing patterns of writing around her before writing her novel, “she was faced with the choice between following one of the regiments and attempting to produce a feminine equivalent to the current masculine realism” (429-430). Writers such as Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, H. D. Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Virginia Woolf focused on women’s material lives and thought patterns in ways that disrupted traditional narrative and disturbed Western conceptual modes. Richardson, for example, developed the stream-of-consciousness technique and repudiated grammatical conventions, such as punctuation, in order to enable Victorian, middle-class women to write themselves into a script that offered them a destiny other than marriage. Sinclair unveiled madness as an arbitrary but gendered social construction while Woolf, as we have seen, manipulated juxtaposed interior monologues to expose and criticize gender conventions (Michael 49-50).

If this interaction between social context and modernist representation seems to have produced transformative social critique, it must also be noted that not all modernist engagement with the world was politically progressive. Recent postcolonial readings of key modernist works have uncovered the racialist biases implicit in avant-garde experimentalism and in canonical modernist texts. To Chinua Achebe and

Edward Said's critical analyses of Conrad's race prejudice—which exists parallel to his challenge to European imperialism in a novel such as *Heart of Darkness*—one may add a more generalized concern recently voiced with modernism's primitivist impulse. We may define “primitivism” as a reaction against the deification of rationality and science, the growth of cities, the capitalist obsession with profit and the ideology of progress that was registered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It led to the search for origins and absolutes for unspoiled nature and uncontaminated humanity in non-Western art forms where many modernists found inspiration for their creations (for more on primitivism in art see Jordan and Weedon). Though it reversed the nineteenth-century racist stereotyping of racial and cultural difference as “negative” primitiveness (barbarism) by reevaluating it in positive terms (what was “bad” before is now “good”), primitivism left the power structures and essential categories of Western racisms untouched (Africans or Polynesians continued to be placed outside history and essentialised). Pablo Picasso's painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907) is perhaps one of the best-known cases of primitivism in avant-garde art.



Image 4.6 Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (Paris, 1907). NYC—MoMA.



Image 4.7 Possibly Kota (Mahongwe subgroup). Mask, late nineteenth century. Wood, pigment, 14 x 6 x 9 in. (35.6 x 15.2 x 22.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Frank L. Babbott Fund, 52.160. Creative Commons-BY

The primitive mask which he borrows from African tribal art not only contributes to the revolution in artistic representation that this painting brings about in the West (it privileges flatness and colour; breaks with the tradition of perspective; represents broken bodies and ugly female prostitutes), but is also posited as what allows him to get in touch with his own inner, primordial artistic power. Picasso finds inspiration in the energy and the spirit of “savagery,” which, though re-contextualised and semantically updated, continues to bear as a concept the imprint of Europe’s homogenizing racialism.

In light of the above, one might be justified in arguing that modernist politics is not monolithic and unified and needs to be interpreted in context. There is much in the disruptive modernist form that enables it to intervene in structures of authority that support imperialism, bourgeois class hegemony or the male-dominated family, according to Edward Said and through Marianne DeKoven’s words (676). It is possible, however, that it may be caught colluding at once with discourses and ideologies that are credited with allowing forms of domination to continue their work. Such is the case, for example, with modernity’s valorisation of progress and novelty which underwrites the modernist desire to experiment with representational means but which at once underlies Europe’s exclusionary attitude towards non-Western cultures that have apparently failed to produce signs of such progressive activity (in technology, the arts or social organization). Postmodernism, as we shall see next, persistently emphasises the importance of context in acts of interpretation, an insight that should be a guiding light in our own interpretive contact with both the aesthetic trends discussed here.

Primitive Art:

They [primitive artists] were against everything—against unknown threatening spirits ... I, too, am against everything. I, too, believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! ... women, children ... the whole of it! I understood what the Negroes used their sculptures for [...] All fetishes [...] were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious [...] they are all the same thing. I understand why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum (the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris) with the masks [...] Les Demoiselles D’ Avignon must have been born that day [...] because it was my first exorcism painting – yes absolutely (Pablo Picasso; qtd in Jordan and Weedon, 336).

Re-Cap:

Modernism:

- ✓ *Epistemological uncertainty.*
- ✓ *Reality recedes inwards; focus on perception and the psyche.*
- ✓ *Break with tradition (make it new); originality valued.*
- ✓ *Desire for stylistic innovation and formal experimentation.*
- ✓ *Conceptual and anti-representational; language itself becomes a new form.*
- ✓ *The disrupted subject is still the locus of truth.*
- ✓ *Elitist and difficult.*

4. The Postmodern

There is no simple way of defining the postmodern. It is a multifaceted and controversial cultural, philosophical and aesthetic formation that has given rise to vexed debates between critics. What may be said with certainty is that it has been a major critical and artistic force in numerous areas of intellectual activity—in literature, art, culture, history, architecture, music, theatre, dance, photography and film—since the term was first used in the 1950s and 1960s. The intense disagreement surrounding its meanings and politics may be, partly, due to the varied ways in which it has been deployed in all the above fields of thought. It may also, however, result from the postmodern's own resistance to being pinned down to an accessible, citable definition. Grasping what escapes the logic and clarity that characterize most definitions (of terms, peoples or communities) and celebrating what resists and disrupts them is after all one of its most identifiable features (Malpas, *The Postmodern* 4).

It is the case that the postmodern is often employed in critical writings to refer to either “postmodernism” or “postmodernity,” which begs the question of their relationship. Are they identical or opposed notions? As suggested in the introduction, postmodernity is often understood to designate a set of intellectual and social conditions, even a historical period, while postmodernism is concerned with aesthetic practices, questions of style and representation (in literature and art). In practice, it is difficult to tell them apart as the slippage in the use of the two terms (using one in the place of the other) reveals the impossibility of separating real living conditions from representation—and this is a recurring idea across postmodernist discourses more generally. What is clear enough is that both terms seem tied to a series of transformations that shaped the world in the twentieth century especially in the post-World War II years. The stretch of time especially since the end of World War II has been often identified as the postmodern era and characterized by the breaking down of borders, an increase in forms of human mobility and immigration, the globalization of capitalism, the rise in consumerism and the development of new media and communication networks—to list only some of the major changes affecting social and cultural organization in the last seventy years.

This is a particularly mobile world that we are living in where mixing and matching clothes, perfumes, cars, types of food, ideas and peoples forms part of our daily routine and, in the eyes of some critics, has become almost synonymous with the postmodern of the “anything goes” (it is very “postmodern” to eat Chinese food in Athens or wear a Ralph Lauren suit in Moscow, for example). For the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, however, the daily experience of the “anything goes” in contemporary cultures speaks more of “the realism of money” and the capitalist pursuit of profit—which excludes entire classes of people pushing them in the margins of need and disenfranchisement (homeless, refugees, asylum seekers)—and less of postmodernism as a critical practice. As he observes in *The Postmodern Condition*, even knowledge is now a marketable commodity. Its production is funded and supported on condition that it brings money in. “No money, no proof [...] no truth,” he writes characteristically. “The games of scientific language become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right (*The Postmodern* 45). What I wish to suggest is that, as a form of critical inquiry, postmodernism disrupts and deregulates the certainties of this “late” capitalist age rather than supports them. But it performs its task from within the system and, therefore, runs the risk of being confounded with it. As Simon Malpas observes, postmodernism “operates within the realist [mainstream] context of a given culture to shatter its norms and challenge its assumptions, not with a new set of criteria drawn from outside of that culture, but rather by showing the contradictions the culture contains, what it represses, refuses to recognise or make unrepresentable” (*The Postmodern* 30, 2).

This view of the postmodern is also useful in helping us think its connection with modernism. Many critics assume that postmodernism follows on from and replaces modernism since the prefix “post,” which means “after,” suggests a chronological succession of periods and aesthetic movements. It is a tempting, and certainly popular, reading as postmodernist texts often demonstrate an attention to style and representation that is shared by modernism's many strands. The problem with this account, according to Lyotard, is that it presents the postmodern as the latest stage in modernity's development. It makes it seem as though postmodernism is part of a linear (historical, social or aesthetic) structure and a narrative of progress that postmodernists clearly find problematic and unsatisfactory. As they point out, the postmodern is suspicious of continuities and is identified, in Lyotard's view, as the very moment when a decline in the ability of progress to improve life is registered (the first perhaps in two hundred years).

More than all else, however, the postmodern, as suggested earlier, operates within the system it critiques. Its job, as a critical practice doing work in literature, art, philosophy and politics, is to investigate the assumptions implicit in modernity (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* 79-80). As such, it cannot be regarded as a new age that replaces the modern but rather as a “critical attitude within the modern” that challenges its assumptions (Malpas, *The Postmodern* 41-45; for more on the characteristics of the postmodern see Malpas). This critical positioning of the postmodern in relation to the modern is made particularly evident in the postmodern’s challenge to questions of novelty and originality, its use of intertextual recycling (of texts, fashions, attitudes) as a means of illustrating the textual character of the real and the subject; its ironic re-creation of the past and history; even in what some recognize as its more “democratic” character which is often due to the fact that, in breaking down the dividing lines between high and popular culture, it often inhabits the popular and is rendered thus more accessible (Waugh 5). In the following sections, I shall expand briefly on some important postmodern ideas regarding the notions of representation, subjectivity and difference mainly through discussions of literature, culture and art.

4.1 Representation

You may find [here](#) information on Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*

Australian film director Baz Luhrmann directed *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* in 1996, with Leonardo di Caprio and Claire Danes in the lead roles. The film presents Shakespeare’s play to a modern audience in ways that appeal to their taste, film knowledge and life experience. Though it remains faithful to the original storyline, the action is transferred to the present, the setting, characters’ clothes and soundtrack are contemporary while the editing is fast, jazzy and exciting, designed to cater to the visual needs of a younger generation. It is fair to say that the final filmic product is organized around some key postmodernist principles, evident especially in its desire to accentuate its artificiality and, consequently, the textual character of the real. I shall focus primarily on the film’s opening scene, which delivers the play’s Prologue, and try to tease out those of its aspects that contribute to its postmodernist effect. In *Romeo + Juliet*, Luhrmann presents the Prologue as a news bulletin. A female newsreader appears on a TV screen, acting in the place of Shakespeare’s narrator, and delivers the original sixteenth-century lines that tell the tragic story of family feud and death.

William Shakespeare, from *Romeo and Juliet* (1597)

ACT I

PROLOGUE

Two households, both alike in dignity,
 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
 From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
 A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life;
 Whole misadventured piteous overthrows
 Do with their death bury their parents’ strife.
 The fearful passage of their death-mark’d love,
 And the continuance of their parents’ rage,
 Which, but their children’s end, nought could remove,
 Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage;

As soon as the Prologue is completed, a series of rapidly edited camera shots present the city's skyscrapers, the leading characters (the Montagues and the Capulets) and the outbreak of violence caused by the feud through a series of newspaper cuttings, headlines and film footage, all relating the families' quarrels. While the media coverage of the civil unrest is unfolding, the first six lines of the Prologue are repeated a second time through a voice-over (an unseen narrator speaking in a film). At the end of it, the story of the two "star-cross'd lovers," as given in the Prologue, is presented to the viewer a third time in the form of written text that flashes across the screen at an incredible speed. Throughout the opening, the editing is fast and the MTV-type music loud, creating tension and leading to a final "explosion" of colour, light, music and writing that creates a visual counterpart to the story's emotionally intense ending but in a new medium.

There are various reasons why Luhrmann's film might be considered postmodernist. For one, it blurs the boundary between high and popular culture. It takes a theatrical play that constitutes, by general consent, "serious" literature and translates it into a filmic representation that employs cinematic techniques (fast editing and exciting music) used by popular entertainment channels and programmes such as MTV or *Miami Vice*. In upsetting the dichotomy between high art and popular culture, the film interrogates the values traditionally attached to the two terms and urges us to examine the cultural norms that have led to the construction of the opposition (what makes some forms of entertainment more legitimate than others, for example). Even as early as the 1950s and the 1960s pop artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein achieved fame by challenging the stability of this very division. Warhol turned consumer products like the Campbell's soup cans or pop celebrities like Marilyn Monroe into art icons while Lichtenstein took comic-strip and advertising images into the select space of the art gallery (see [here](#)).

A second reason why Luhrmann's film might be considered postmodernist is that it self-consciously advertises its own status as representation in at least two ways. It openly recycles Shakespeare's text and, in a way, its own self as a film. It takes an event (the death of the two lovers) and presents it in three different ways, with each one emphatically calling attention to its storytelling qualities (the same "story" is recycled three times, each time starting the film anew). Given its self-identification as recyclable narrative, the opening scene is clearly asking a question. How can we tell the story of an event? How can we represent an event? In other words, how can we get to the real? What is strongly suggested is that we do not get the event but a *representation* of the event. The repetition of the Prologue serves to bring to the fore the fact that every attempt to grasp the real (the event of the lovers' death) always leads us to a text (newspaper stories lead to a TV news programme which leads to Shakespeare's play and so on). Another way in which *Romeo + Juliet* emphasizes its representational character is through its editing. The film's fast editing and the abrupt, rapid sequence of camera shots with which viewers are bombarded disrupt the comforting effect of continuity editing which allows viewers to become immersed in the narrative plotline by helping them forget that they are watching a film.

In drawing attention to itself as a series of camera shots, Luhrmann's film highlights instead its own constructed character as filmic representation and makes a comment on the nature and the accessibility of the real. In Western metaphysics the categories of reality, fact and truth have been traditionally set against the notions of representation, fiction or falsehood. The basis of this opposition lies, as Magali Cornier Michael reminds us, in the belief that a stable, objective reality exists outside of representation. Realist aesthetics assumes that this reality can be represented directly, while modernists insist that the real is a question of perception and perspective. For postmodernists, material reality exists but it is always *mediated* by representations (Michael 37). Our perceptions, as it were, are continually mediated by culturally, socially and historically constructed meanings, emotions, fears and desires—which is perhaps one way of reading the controversial statement of the French critic Jacques Derrida that "there is nothing outside of the text" ("il n'y a pas de hors texte," 158). To claim this is not to deny the materiality of the world but to admit that we cannot access it directly or unproblematically. Our daily lives may not be merely "textual" but they are made meaningful with the help of knowledges that are always already ideologically inflected, subject to fictions and

Continuity editing:

is the predominant style of film editing and video editing in the post-production process of filmmaking of narrative films and television programmes. The purpose of continuity editing is to smooth over the inherent discontinuity of the editing process and to establish a logical coherence between shots. In most films, logical coherence is achieved by cutting to continuity, which emphasizes smooth transition of time and space.

(self-)interests (class, gender or racial interests, to mention a few). Within this scheme of things, traditional distinctions between fact and fiction or truth and falsehood become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Consider, for example, how Lurhmann's opening scene plays with the cinematic convention of credit giving which usually takes place in a section of the film that clearly sets itself apart from the film's fictional world in order to give credit to the crew. Unlike mainstream feature films, Luhrmann chooses to present the story's leading characters in a series of frozen frames. Each character's name appears next to the actor's face in a way that reminds us of the credits section at the start or close of films and television series. Only that here the clear-cut division between fact and fiction has collapsed as it is not the actor's name that appears next to the actor's face but the character's (compare it, for instance, to the opening credits of the television series *The Bold and the Beautiful*). To those inimical towards the postmodern, the loss of the real as an objectively verifiable category signifies the loss of history and the subject's ability to transform his world (for this type of critical response to postmodernism see the work of the American literary theorist Fredric Jameson). To its defenders, disrupting the opposition between reality and fiction can be politically effective for marginalized groups. It encourages the critical examination of cultural codes that have sustained oppressive structures and reveals "the artificial basis of existing relations of power" (Michael 37), their "fictionality" as it were. To give an example, feminist attempts to critique patriarchal authority can be much helped by a critical formation such as that of postmodernism's which exposes patriarchy's norms (regarding, for example, the meanings assigned to femininity and masculinity in a given context) as culturally and historically constructed (that is, "fictional").

What is more, as Magali Cornier Michael observes, "the assertion that mediated representations are the only means of access to reality transforms art into a valid and potentially active space for political engagement" (37). Postmodernist fiction has indeed become a vehicle of gender and racial critique on both sides of the Atlantic since the middle of the twentieth century. Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, for example, have drawn on postmodernist insights to challenge the power of myth and of fairy tales to disseminate patriarchal gender norms, while Jeanette Winterson has employed the notion of intertextual exchange to encourage us to rethink the idea of romantic love that is central to constructions of heterosexuality. Moreover, in the context of postcolonial critique, writers such as Salman Rushdie and J. M. Coetzee have located in the postmodern tools that enable them to disturb structures of racial inequality in Western conceptualizations of cultural difference. To exemplify the manner in which postmodernist fiction might be used to challenge hegemonic norms, I would now like to turn to Margaret Atwood's short story "Women's Novels" (1983).

Metafiction:

Any work of fiction which seems preoccupied with its own fictionality or with the nature of fiction generally. In the same way as a metalanguage reflects on language(s), metafiction is fiction whose subject is fiction. Metafiction differs from realist fiction, which employs all kinds of techniques—linear narrative, cause and effect, detailed description, rich characters and dialogue—to encourage readers to feel that what they are reading corresponds with reality. Metafiction, by contrast, obliges its readers to consider first and foremost its own artifice; it disrupts the illusion that fiction gives direct access to the "real world." Common techniques include beginnings and endings which comment on the nature of beginnings and endings; the appearance of the author as a character (who may well discuss the process of writing the narrative); and the realization by characters that they are merely characters.

Blackwell: Reference on Line

*In a film, television program or video game, the **opening credits** are shown at the very beginning and list the most important members of the production. They are now usually shown as text superimposed on a blank screen or static pictures, or sometimes on top of action in the show. There may or may not be accompanying music. When opening credits are built into a separate sequence of their own, the correct term is title sequence (such as the familiar James Bond and Pink Panther title sequences). Opening credits since the early 1980s, if present at all, identify the major actors and crew, while the **closing credits** list an extensive cast and production crew.*

Atwood's story is concerned throughout with acts of reading, storytelling and gender. It focuses on the novels that women like to read (and write) as well as the novels men prefer to buy (or write) and draws our attention to dominant gender representations that are frequently invoked in mainstream fiction. In that sense, the story's metafictional character—that is, the fact that it is fiction that discusses fiction—is hard to miss. Very much like Luhrmann's film, the short story also self-consciously signals its awareness of its own fictionality and standing as representation (it acknowledges the fact that it is a story) by attracting attention to its own textual processes and attempts at shattering the “transparency” effect that realism strives to achieve. Not many realist conventions are adhered to here: the narrative voice (though humorous and cheeky) is hard to locate; there is no distinguishable plot or linearity or any type of resolution; the reader is not kept respectfully outside the “action” (and in charge of it) but is drawn right into it, shaken out of his position of comfortable invisibility by being turned into an object of analysis. And this is because what Atwood's story does best is talk about readers. It dissects and calls attention to our reading habits, suggesting that how we read fictional stories (what we like about them or how we make sense of them) is inextricably connected to how we read and understand gender. It is interesting to follow how the narrative projects its concern with the reading of gender. First, it draws attention to the popular gender clichés that are recycled from novel to novel. Second, by self-consciously underlining the intertextual recycling of these stereotypical representations, it points to the culturally and discursively constructed character of the gender realities they speak of.

From the start of the story we are warned that if “Men favor heroes who are tough and hard: tough with men, hard with women” (29), women are attracted to romantic stories with chivalrous men and happy endings. As the narrator admits, “I like to read novels in which the heroine has a costume rustling discreetly over her breasts, or discreet breasts rustling under her costume; in any case there must be a costume, some breasts, some rustling, and, over all, discretion. Discretion over all, like a fog, a miasma through which the outlines of things appear only vaguely. A glimpse of pink through the gloom, the sound of breathing, satin slithering to the floor, revealing what?” (29). The story invokes here an image of femininity that may be taken from romantic fiction. Is it a heroine secretly meeting a lover? Or a chance encounter between two future lovers? The narrator's reverie? In any case, sexual desire is powerfully invoked. We can almost hear the sound of her breathing as her “discreet” breasts heave with “discreet” desire under the rustling silk of her dress. Repeatedly emphasized by the narrative, discretion implies here social rules that must not be broken and the representation of women in this passage is firmly tied both to discretion and society. It suggests that female sexuality displayed in public is not socially acceptable (as respectable womanhood must be coy and chaste), which of course makes it all the more titillating in the eyes of a lover and certainly more intriguing for readers.

Moreover, to continue with another popular representation of femininity visited by Atwood's text, the association of respectable femininity with virtue has also been a powerful, middle-class gender stereotype in modernity. It is regularly posited, in stories and films, as the prerequisite for a happy ending in marriage and everlasting love. Listen to the narrator speaking again: “I want happiness, guaranteed, joy all round, covers with nurses on them or brides, intelligent girls but not too intelligent, with regular teeth and pluck and both breasts the same size and no excess facial hair, someone you can depend on to know where the bandages are and to turn the hero, that potential rake and killer, into a well-groomed country gentleman with clean fingernails and the right vocabulary. *Always*, he has to say, *Forever*. I no longer want to read books that don't end with the word *forever*. I want to be stroked between the eyes, one way only” (31). The narrator puts her finger here on the fairy-tale motif that turns happy-ending stories into such a good read for so many women. Happiness is ultimately achieved. But the precondition for happiness, both in the novels and the readers' real-life situations, is that women fulfill their destiny as paragons of virtue. They must safeguard public morality by transforming wayward men into respectable members of society. This is a gender norm whose representation can be encountered equally in a Harlequin romantic story and in a classic novel such as *Jane*

Intertextuality:

is the name often given to the manner in which texts of all sorts (oral, visual, literary, virtual) contain references to other texts that have, in some way, contributed to their production and signification. The notion was initially introduced by the French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva. Intertextuality, with its endlessly receding network of debts and legacies, disturbs a casual belief in the uniqueness of the text and of the originality of the authorial consciousness. (Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms 121-122)

Eyre. It repeats itself and is recycled, passing from novel to novel and reader to reader and disseminating in the process patriarchal ideas of gender.

Atwood's feminist—and postmodernist—gesture consists in drawing attention to this recycling process quite self-consciously. It reproduces a series of dominant representations of femininity and masculinity as encountered in (popular romantic) fiction and encourages us to read them critically. Humour functions as a powerful defamiliarising, critical device in this respect. In the story's final lines, the narrator is caught trying to decode metaphors used quite frequently in fictional writing to construct a heroine as a precious and desirable catch, pure and untamed as a wild animal and, therefore, precious to possess.

Margaret Atwood, from “Women's Novels”

She had the startled eyes of a wild bird. This is the kind of sentence I go mad for. I would like to be able to write such sentences, without embarrassment. I would like to be able to read them without embarrassment. If I could only do these two simple things, I feel, I would be able to pass my allotted time on this earth like a pearl wrapped in velvet.

She had the startled eyes of a wild bird. Ah, but which one? A screech owl, perhaps, or a cuckoo? It does make a difference. We do not need more literalists of the imagination. They cannot read a body like a gazelle's without thinking of intestinal parasites, zoos, and smells.

She had a feral gaze like that of an untamed animal, I read. Reluctantly I put down the book, thumb still inserted at the exciting moment. He's about to crush her in his arms, pressing his hot, devouring, hard, demanding mouth to hers as her breasts squish out the top of her dress, but I can't concentrate. Metaphor leads me by the nose, into the maze, and suddenly all Eden lies before me. Porcupines, weasels, warhogs, and skunks, their feral gazes malicious or bland or stolid or piggy and sly. Agony, to see the romantic *frisson* quivering just out of reach, a dark-winged butterfly stuck to an overripe peach, and not be able to swallow, or wallow. *Which one?* I murmur to the unresponding air. *Which one?* (32-33)

The narrator's almost comical attempt at guessing which wild animal the heroine could be likened to is not an effect that the steamy love story which she is reading at this point ever intended to produce. Rather, it breaks the “spell” and her identification with the characters, and stops her from becoming emotionally involved with, and absorbed into, the love scene as expected. In that sense, her unplanned, unconventional, quite humorous, response to the love story unsettles the story's anticipated effect and the reader's identification with the romantic heroine and all that she represents in terms of gender. It works, for one, to remind us that the love scene in question is a fictional convention, a narrative and gender cliché that moves across texts and ends up being a copy of a copy which does not necessarily convey the truth about men and women. The metaphor of the wild bird is foregrounded precisely as a metaphor, language used to construct a representation of femininity which is seen now as a linguistic and cultural construct. It is fair to argue that the postmodernist focus on representation in Atwood's text reveals not only the mediated character of reality but the extent to which this mediation is gender-coded. Its feminist challenge materializes within the system of patriarchal representational exchange (the mainstream stories women like to read) and encourages us to read it differently, or to use Linda Hutcheon's term, denaturalize it. In Hutcheon's words, “the postmodern's initial concern is to denaturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact ‘cultural’: made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees” (2).

4.2 Difference and the Subject

Hutcheon identifies here what is politically progressive about the postmodern and allows a glimpse into the reasons why it has engaged the interest of feminist and postcolonial thinkers. To accept that the world, or rather our perception of it, is not “given” or “natural” but constructed in language, history and culture is a

thought that has appealed to marginalized groups who have had restrictive and often denigrating identities imposed on them. It implies that our understanding of the world, filtered as it is through representations and the stories that we tell ourselves and each other about it, can be rewritten and reformulated. It can be changed along with all the dominant discourses that have oppressively circumscribed, for example, women's sexuality or black inferiority over the ages.

What also contributes to a politically enabling view of the real in postmodernism is the thought that our understanding of the world is made up not of one but numerous narratives that are in circulation interacting and competing with each other. This markedly contrasts with modernity's desire to explain a huge variety of phenomena in life in terms of one overarching and all-inclusive story, what Jean-François Lyotard terms a "grand narrative." Patriarchy, Europe, Christianity, Marxism and psychoanalysis provide examples of grand narratives since each one of them attempts to present the world as being organized around one central idea that it considers universally applicable—whether this might be masculine superiority, white supremacy, the word of God, the laws of capitalism or the unconscious. The postmodern is the moment when we lose faith in the power of these grand narratives to deliver the truth about our experience in the singular, and accept the need to consider alternative representations of the real, which might have been so far sidelined and excluded, as equally legitimate. Attention is now directed to smaller, local narratives whose value and truth is judged within specific contexts, making the truth value of any given narrative or world view the product of an ongoing negotiation, hence contingent and changeable. In other words, in the postmodern outlook, no explanatory narrative is equally valid for all across time and space, a thought that is not alien to students of literature, who as trained readers of texts, are well aware of the multiplicity of readings a literary text can receive, all of which are dependent on the historical and cultural contexts within which they are produced and received (hence a Shakespearean play may receive a different reading in contemporary China than it did in eighteenth-century England).

Postmodernism's interventions in representational practices in literature and art are underwritten by this contingent politics of difference, the need to begin to acknowledge the existence of different viewpoints on the real and their struggle for legitimation. To give a quick example, Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers an alternative representation of Rochester's first, mad Creole wife Bertha Mason, as given in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, through a fictional text that experiments with style, structure and point of view. Her account of Antoinette's (as Bertha is known in the novel) life before she meets Rochester, with its emphasis on the historical and social circumstances that led to the collapse of the plantation system in the West Indies in the middle of the nineteenth century, not only explains Bertha's madness but strongly suggests that it is an identity fabricated to serve the interests of patriarchy and colonialism that Rochester represents in the text. The novel provides in this way an alternative account both of *Jane Eyre*'s representation of the specific Creole "mad woman in the attic" and, more generally, Europe's negotiation of racial and cultural difference at this point in time. It provides, in other words, a story different to that circulating in nineteenth-century Europe about racially different women which makes a claim to legitimacy and destabilizes the grand narrative of white supremacy (rendered now as contingent in its truth claims as the marginal narrative that competes against it).

The changes brought about by the loss of faith in grand narratives and the postmodern's valorization of (contingently articulated) difference has also affected its thinking on identity. Postmodernism rigorously challenges ideas about the subject as conceived by Enlightenment humanism. The self-contained, unified and coherent modern subject (one with the Eiffel Tower visitor) gives way to the decentred and fragmented subject of postmodernity. It is telling that we now use the term "subjectivity" to speak about identity. It is a linguistic choice that reflects a more general understanding of individual identity as being "subject" to language, history and culture, as being produced, rather than given, as a result of circumstances and variables that are at work in specific contexts. Subjectivity speaks of *positions*, those positions in which we are placed when we are interpellated (addressed) by ideology and language (for example, men are traditionally placed in "positions" of superiority by patriarchal ideologies while women in positions of inferiority).

Following on the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious, subjectivity as a term also implies the "self-divided" subject, that is, one's self-perception which is not complete—as there is always something about it that escapes our conscious control. What postmodern theories of the subject often throw light on—reworking the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan—is the existence of this other (unconscious) space within us which, in effect, also works to blur the boundaries between self and other in society, rendering our relationship to others (individuals or communities) contingent.

To detractors of the postmodern this notion of the subject signifies a loss of control which is construed as debilitating as it is assumed to be taking power away from the subject's individual agency and ability to control his fate, his will and his world. To defenders of the postmodern, it creates an opening towards the other that helps build a relationship not of domination of the self over the other but a relationship that relies on self-interrogation. That has the potential of creating respect for that which is not "us" and is, therefore, unknown to us (that in itself can function as the basis of a cultural politics of difference that allows individual subjects and communities to develop more inclusive modes of interaction). If, then, human identity is, for postmodernism, a question of positionality, context and perspective, it is at once suggested as plural, contingent and changeable. It is no wonder, in that sense, that it is popular with many women writers and artists.

Take, for example, the case of Barbara Krüger's photographic collage *Untitled (You are not Yourself)*, (1981). It is a self-conscious piece of art that makes visual and explicit the feminist and postmodern conception of woman as a non-essential, social construct. Displaying a woman examining herself in a shattered mirror, Krüger interprets the myth of woman as a social mechanism by which a restrictive identity is imposed on women (femininity is traditionally seen as being associated with specific attributes such as motherhood, weakness, emotion, home and so on). She uses bold graphic techniques to jar the woman, as well as the viewer, in the mirror delivering a wake-up call from the messages delivered by society. The small size of the word "not" indicates that society attempts to trick women into believing "You Are Yourself," you are, that is, what dominant discourses dictate that you are (for more see [here](#)). The word "not," however, also shatters the mirror society holds up to women, breaks the surface on which identity is constructed and suggests a multiplicity of selves in existence. The fragmented mirror speaks, for some, of an impossible demand issued by society that expects women to play a variety of roles simultaneously; to others, it constitutes an acknowledgement that the self is never unitary and hence the single affirmative identity conferred on us ("You are yourself") is a representation that can be shattered.

4.3 Banksy's Dismaland: A Bemusement Park



Image 4.8 Dismaland. Photograph: Florent Darrault (24.08.2015). [Wikimedia Commons](#).

As a way of rounding off the discussion on the postmodern, I would like to make a reference to Banksy's *Dismaland*, an art work, or art performance, which is driven on by the postmodern impulse to challenge established beliefs about representation and reality. Banksy, a street artist whose identity remains a secret, hit the British newspapers' headlines in August 2015 with the creation of a theme park on the Weston-super-Mare seafront in the west of England which the artist describes as "unsuitable for small children" (Brown) (<http://dismaland.co.uk/>; for a video see [here](#)). This is no understatement when you consider that the Grim Reaper rides the dodgems and Cinderella lies dead in her crashed princely carriage surrounded by paparazzi.



Image 4.9 Banksy's Cinderella crash scene. Photograph: David Levene for The Guardian (20.08.2015)



Image 4.10 The Grim Reaper rides the dodgems at Dismaland. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA; The Guardian (20.08.2015)

And these are only two exhibits on the site. The unconventionality of the theme park is evident from the start when visitors are forced to go through a security control of the type endured at airports and are faced with unsmiling, unhelpful, depressed-looking attendants some of whom are selling “I am an Imbecile” black helium balloons and are reportedly briefed to respond to every request for information with a sullen shrug or “wanker” gesture. What follows may comprise sticking your head through a hole and taking a picture of yourself as a terrorist, the drive-your-own model boats full of desperate migrants or visiting a “pocket money loans” shop offering money to children at an interest rate of 5,000%.

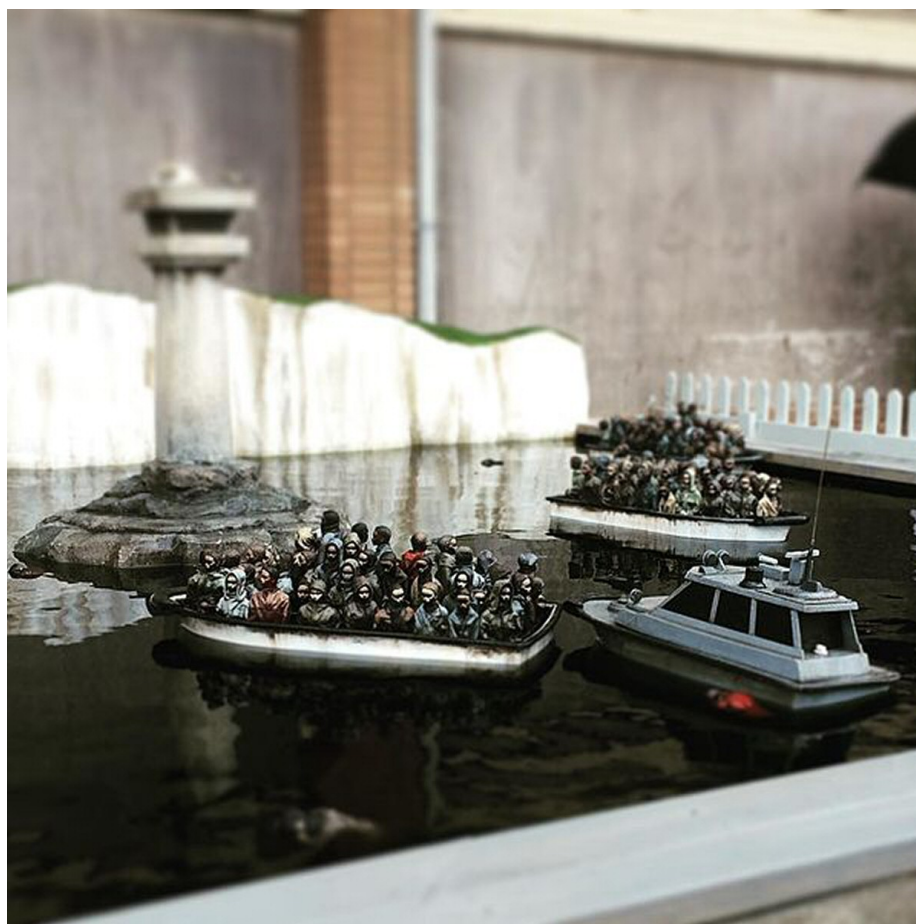


Image 4.11 A close up of the “migrants” in the installation. Toby Melville / Reuters

In front of its counter is a small trampoline so that children can bounce up to read the outrageous small print drawn up by artist Darren Cullen (Brown).

In fact, *Dismaland* features the work of 58 handpicked artists, including Damien Hirst, Jenny Holzer and Banksy’s own, all of which address the “culture of happiness” which seems to be at the butt end of contemporary consumerism and entertainment (Disneyland-type) business. *Dismaland* is both shocking and funny and gets visitors to think about what is left out of their world picture so that they can lead their affluent, “happy” Western lifestyles. It is amazing to think how much contemporary western cultures have invested in the concept of happiness which is tied not only to the efficient operation of a well-oiled capitalist system but to the smoothing over of its contradictions and inconsistencies. Consider, for example, that in November 2010 the British Prime Minister David Cameron assembled a group of journalists in the Treasury for a speech on national happiness which was the result of a recently discovered insight in his government that bringing understandings of psychology to policy making will increase citizen contentment and as a result the state’s tax revenues (Thring). As it appears, creating happy citizens is both a cultural and a government aim in Britain these days.

Dismaland is a response to this climate of unruptured self contentment. When asked why the world needs *Dismaland*, Banksy replied “Dismaland is an experiment in offering something less resolved. Why should children be immune from the idea that to maintain our standard of life, other children have to die trapped in the hulls of boats in the bottom of the Mediterranean?” (Mills). In *Dismaland*, children and adults become acquainted with the debt-creating world which they inhabit or are confronted with their “involvement” in world terrorism when taking their pictures as terrorists (no more immunity from accepting responsibility in world politics).

In closing I would like to point out that *Dismaland* is beyond doubt art that “surprises.” It upsets the visitors’ expectations and breaks with what theme parks and fairgrounds have come to stand for in our cultural imaginary (pleasure, excitement, comfort). It disorients our understanding of leisure time and all the values connected with it and does so by inhabiting the system. *Dismaland* re-creates what is perhaps a consumer’s, a tourist’s or a family’s paradise, a theme park, but with a difference since it has changed the rules that

determine how it operates and how we relate to it as viewers-visitors. In raising issues of war, famine, death and exploitation through its exhibits, it causes visitors to confront their own habits of living, values and priorities in life in ways that are not always clear (this is a “bemusement park” after all) but in a productive fashion (mirth and discomfort are both present). One might say that Banksy’s artwork materialises what the postmodern aims to do according to Lyotard: it “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (“Answering the Question” 81). It surprises us out of our certainties—it surprises, in fact, the system itself out of its certainties by forcing it to face its contradictions—and creates a space in our thought which is not yet full of the familiar and is ready to take on the unknown—with varying results and surprisingly not always dismally.

Re-Cap:

The Postmodern (main features):

- ✓ *Draws attention to the role of representation in constructions of reality.*
- ✓ *Decentres the liberal humanist subject.*
- ✓ *Breaks down the distinction between high and popular culture.*
- ✓ *Upsets the system it critiques from within.*
- ✓ *Is marked by increased self-consciousness about the methods it uses.*
- ✓ *Relies on recycling and intertextual exchange.*

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