

Derrida and Foucault, represented a specific repudiation of this kind of Enlightenment 'modernity'. They attacked, in his view, the ideals of reason, clarity, truth, and progress, and as they were thereby detached from the quest for justice, he identified them as 'young conservatives'.

The term 'postmodernism' was used in the 1930s, but its current sense and vogue can be said to have begun with Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester University Press, 1979). Lyotard's essay 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', first published in 1982, added in 1984 as an appendix to *The Postmodern Condition* and included in Brooker's *Modernism/Postmodernism*, 1992, takes up this debate about the Enlightenment, mainly targeting Habermas, in a slightly oblique manner. Lyotard opens with a move which effectively turns the debate into a struggle to demonstrate that one's opponents are the real conservatives (a familiar 'bottom line' of polemical writing on culture). From every direction, he says, 'we are being urged to put an end to experimentation', and after citing several other instances he writes (obviously of Habermas):

I have read a thinker of repute who defends modernity against those he calls the neo-conservatives. Under the banner of post-modernism, the latter would like, he believes, to get rid of the uncompleted project of modernism, that of the Enlightenment. (Brooker, p. 141)

Habermas's is simply one voice in a chorus which is calling for an end to 'artistic experimentation' and for 'order ... unity, for identity, for security' (Brooker, p. 142). In a word, these voices want 'to liquidate the heritage of the avant-gardes'. For Lyotard the Enlightenment whose project Habermas wishes to continue is simply one of the would-be authoritative 'overarching', 'totalising' explanations of things – like Christianity, Marxism, or the myth of scientific progress. These 'metanarratives' ['super-narratives'], which purport to explain and reassure, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality. Hence Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, that it is, simply, 'incredulity towards metanarratives', 'Grand Narratives'

of progress and human perfectability, then, are no longer tenable, and the best we can hope for is a series of 'mininarratives', which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernity thus 'deconstructs' the basic aim of the Enlightenment, that is 'the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject'.

Another major theorist of postmodernism is the contemporary French writer Jean Baudrillard, whose book *Simulations* (1981, translated 1983) marks his entry into this field. Baudrillard is associated with what is usually known as 'the loss of the real', which is the view that in contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV, and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of 'hyperreality', in which distinctions between these are eroded. His propositions are worked out in his essay 'Simulacra and Simulations' reprinted in abridged form in Brooker, 1992. He begins by evoking a past era of 'fullness', when a sign was a surface indication of an underlying depth or reality ('an outward sign of inward grace', to cite the words of the Roman Catholic Catechism). But what, he asks, if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs? Then the whole system becomes what he calls a *simulacrum*. He then substitutes for *representation* the notion of *simulation*. The sign reaches its present stage of emptiness in a series of steps, which I will try to illustrate by comparing them to different kinds of paintings.

*Firstly*, then, the sign represents a basic reality: let's take as an example of this the representations of the industrial city of Salford in the work of the twentieth-century British artist L. S. Lowry. Mid-century life for working people in such a place was hard, and the paintings have an air of monotony and repetitiveness – cowed, stick-like figures fill the streets, colours are muted, and the horizon filled with grim factory-like buildings. As signs, then, Lowry's paintings seem to represent the basic reality of the place they depict.

The *second* stage for the sign is that it misrepresents or distorts the reality behind it. As an example of this let's take the glam-

ourised representations of cities like Liverpool and Hull in the paintings of the Victorian artist Atkinson Grimshaw. These paintings show the cities at night, wet pavements reflecting the bright lights of dockside shops, the moon emerging from behind clouds, and a forest of ships' masts silhouetted against the sky. Life in these places at that time was presumably grim, too, but the paintings offer a romantic and glamourised image, so the sign can be said to misrepresent what it shows.

The *third* stage for the sign is when the sign disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath. To illustrate this, take a device used in the work of the surrealist artist René Magritte, where, in the painting, an easel with a painter's canvas on it is shown standing alongside a window: on the canvas in the painting is painted the exterior scene which we can see through the window. But what is shown beyond the window is not reality; against which the painting within the painting can be judged, but simply another sign, another depiction, which has no more authority or reality than the painting within the painting (which is actually a representation of a representation).

The *fourth* and last stage for the sign is that it bears no relation to any reality at all. As an illustration of this stage we have simply to imagine a completely abstract painting, which is not representational at all, like one of the great purple mood canvases of Mark Rothko, for instance. I should emphasise that I'm not suggesting that these four paintings are examples of the four stages of the sign, merely that the four stages can be thought of as analogous to the four different ways in which these paintings signify or represent things.

The first two of these stages are fairly clear, the second two perhaps less so. Baudrillard's own example of the third stage (when the sign hides an absence) is Disneyland. In one way, of course, it is a sign of the second type, a mythologised misrepresentation of the United States:

All its [the USA's] values are exalted here, in miniature and comic-strip form. Embalmed and pacified ... digest of the American way of life, panegyric to American values, idealised transposition of a contradictory reality.

(Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism*, p. 154)

But Disneyland is actually a 'third-order simulation' (a sign which conceals an absence):

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral. Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real.

In a word, Disneyland has the effect of 'concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle'. Within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses: *everything* is a model or an image, all is surface without depth, this is the *hyperreal*, as Baudrillard calls it.

The grand sweep of this kind of rhetoric has a strong appeal. One might see it as a kind of latter-day Platonism, its devotees enjoying the mystical insight that what is normally taken as a solid and real world is actually just a tissue of dreamlike images. If this second aspect of the postmodern condition, this loss of the real, is accepted as a fact, then it is hard to see a ground for literary theory to occupy, since all methods of literary interpretation – Marxist, feminist, structuralist, and so on – depend upon the making of a distinction between surface and depth, between what is *seen* in the text and some *underlying* meaning. Once we accept that what we see is all we get, then there is, clearly, very little which a literary critic or theorist can claim to be doing.

More generally, for postmodernism there are certain ever-present questions and provisos. In this extreme Baudrillardian form, the 'loss of the real' may seem to legitimise a callous indifference to suffering. In a now notorious pronouncement Baudrillard maintained that the Gulf War never happened, that what 'really' took place was a kind of televised virtual reality. (See the book by Christopher Norris in the Selected reading section.) Likewise, if we accept the 'loss of the real' and the collapsing of reality and simulation into a kind of virtual reality, then what of the Holocaust? Could this, too, be part of the reality 'lost' in the image networks? In other words, without a belief in some of the con-

cepts which postmodernism undercuts – history, reality, and truth, for instance – we may well find ourselves in some pretty repulsive company.

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### STOP and THINK

The crucial category in Baudrillard's four-stage model is the third one, the sign which conceals an absence, which conceals the fact that the supposedly 'real' which it represents is no longer there, that beyond the play of surfaces there is nothing else.

It is not easy to achieve a precise understanding of this concept. It may help in doing so if you try to think of examples other than Disneyland. The idealised images of masculinity or femininity presented in advertisements, for instance, may be helpful: these also are copies or representations for which no original exists – no actual people are quite like these, though people might strive to become like them. In this way the image tends to become the reality, and the two tend to become indistinguishable.

Further, if we agree that the real has indeed been lost then we need to decide how we react to this fact. If we are to revel in the boundary-free zone which results, we will need to be sure that the 'real' is a concept we can do without. Perhaps recent events suggest otherwise. In the television coverage of the Gulf War we saw computer-image film of high-tech 'smart' weapons homing in on Iraqi targets, while the commentary spoke of 'surgical strikes' which could 'take out' key enemy installations. News bulletins also included footage of pilots who spoke of what they were doing in the same 'unreal' terms, using the terminology of video combat games, for instance. Perhaps these things are symptomatic of what can happen when the category of the real is eroded. Likewise, could we condemn the Holocaust without the category of the real, or

campaign against (say) racial discrimination or environmental pollution?

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### What postmodernist critics do

1. They discover postmodernist themes, tendencies, and attitudes within literary works of the twentieth century and explore their implications.
2. They foreground fiction which might be said to exemplify the notion of the 'disappearance of the real', in which shifting postmodern identities are seen, for example, in the mixing of literary genres (the thriller, the detective story, the myth saga, and the realist psychological novel, etc.).
3. They foreground what might be called 'intertextual elements' in literature, such as parody, pastiche, and allusion, in all of which there is a major degree of reference between one text and another, rather than between the text and a safely external reality.
4. They foreground irony, in the sense described by Umberto Eco, that whereas the modernist tries to destroy the past, the postmodernist realises that the past must be revisited, but 'with irony' (*Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. Peter Brooker, p. 227).
5. They foreground the element of 'narcissism' in narrative technique, that is, where novels focus on and debate their own ends and processes, and thereby 'de-naturalise' their content.
6. They challenge the distinction between high and low culture, and highlight texts which work as hybrid blends of the two.

### Postmodernist criticism: an example

A useful example of postmodernist criticism, which makes a straightforward application of ideas derived from Lyotard, is Jeffrey Nealon's 'Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern: Language games, Play, and *Waiting for Godot*' (reprinted in the Macmillan 'New Casebook' on *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, ed. Steven