

Postmodernism in 30 Minutes

Image: Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?* (1956, Collage)

What is (was?) Modernism?

1. Early 20th-century aesthetic movement (esp. 1910-30): TS Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, etc.
2. Rejected Victorian notions of art: its purposes, its formal features, and its relationship to its audience
3. Emphasizes individual experience and perception (impressionism); concern with how the world is experienced (rather than what the world is). Think stream-of-consciousness writing.
4. Movement away from fixed narrative points of view, like omniscient “all seeing, all knowing” narrators.
5. Interest in blurring the boundaries between poetry and prose: less obviously distinct than they once were
6. Interest in fragmentation and collage
7. An emphasis on self-reflexivity: the work of art draws attention to itself as a work of art
8. Blurring of the boundaries between popular art forms (photography, advertising, later film) and ‘high art’ categories

What is Postmodernism?

1. Later 20th-century aesthetic movement, ongoing now
2. Rejected Victorian notions of art: its purposes, its formal features, and its relationship to its audience
3. Emphasizes individual experience and perception (impressionism); concern with how the world is experienced (rather than what the world is). Think stream-of-consciousness writing.

4. Movement away from fixed narrative points of view, like omniscient “all seeing, all knowing” narrators.
5. Interest in blurring the boundaries between poetry and prose: less obviously distinct than they once were
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So What’s the Difference?

Modernism

- laments fragmentation and disorder as decay
- art offers a respite from the perils of life in a mass society

Postmodernism

- celebrates *bricolage* and pastiche as play
- art is helpless, but fun!

Enlightenment Ideas

1. I have a stable and coherent self who is rational and universal
2. I know the world through reason and rationality
3. I produce objective truth or “science” that isn’t constrained by me
4. This truth is what leads to progress and improvement
5. Reason, truth, and “the good” are synonymous
6. Science is the best application of my rationality: it is neutral and objective and unbiased
7. Language is how rationality is expressed and its discoveries communicated; it is “transparent” and can objectively represent the reality or the world (think photography)

8. There is no difference between objects in the world and the words used to name them in language
9. These premises stand behind and support EVERYTHING: democracy, law, ethics, and aesthetics

Back to Our Question: What is Postmodernism?

1. a challenge to order
2. a dismantling of enlightenment ideas behind modern culture
3. the end of “master narratives” - the grand stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our culture: Progress; Science; Rationality; God
4. the recognition of small, provisional kinds of knowledge
5. no stable rational self observing the world
6. self is fragmented and doesn't understand its own ways of operating, has a deep psychology that splits it into many bits and parts
7. the observing self influences the creation of “knowledge” (the observer effect; Schrödinger's cat experiment)
8. language doesn't “represent” reality; it constructs it and construes it
9. no necessary relationship between words and the objects they name
10. all culture and information is positional; it isn't necessarily “subjective” but it isn't objective and entirely “true” and universal either
11. Human identity is positional too; it isn't natural and “true”; it is a performance, a putting on of a COSTUME that isn't a disguise: The consume IS ALL THERE IS

Sources:

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