

## ORAL CULTURE

As a result, **oral society was different from our own** in a number of fundamental ways:

- 1) **no written laws**
- 2) **knowledge is based on what is relevant in the present**
- 3) **no authors**
- 4) **no private self:**
- 5) **no inalienable human rights**
- 6) **no money**
- 7) **gift society**

7 a) hospitality: indeed, one is not even supposed to ask the identity of a stranger;

7 b) women as gifts

7 c) sacrifice, which could be seen as the religious equivalent or analog of the gift.

## THE RENAISSANCE (1550-1660) or “guilt culture” [identity becomes vertical (on a deep scale of internal struggle)]

### A transitional period

- Movement into literate culture
- Introduction of print reproduction
- The Bible acquires permanence (one should not change it or even represent it)
- Religion is brought near the individual ⇒ each individual has the ability to access the word

### Questioning and scientific discovery

- a Copernicus versus a Ptolemaic universe
- advances in natural science
- questioning the literal truth of the Bible
- political revolution: O. Cromwell's REPUBLIC
- **shift from oral culture movement into a monotheistic belief system**
- internalization of epic values
- **MILTON's PARADISE LOST (good example of transition ⇒ polytheistic shame culture Satan)**

In a “guilt culture” identity becomes vertical (on a deep scale of internal struggle)

**The private self is invented**  
**In this post-Christian culture**  
**We are all already guilty**  
**and**  
**We are all equal**

slavery, warfare for mere material gain, misogyny, and rape must therefore be seen as morally corrupt.

**Every person according to this system, no matter how lowly, possesses certain inalienable rights that must never be denied.**

## Restoration/ Enlightenment. 18th Century (1660-1789)

a time of retrenchment(a cutting down or off, as by the reduction of expenses)

The monarchy in England is restored in 1660

The culture seems to subscribe more to the values of a **shame culture rather than a guilt culture** (external experience, social reputation, etiquette, and courtliness).

family situations (for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds's painting, The Fourth Duke and Duchess with their Family—at left) underlines the formal and performative aspects of what is clearly a scene (complete with curtain and stage).

### **This is the Age of Reason.**

**Hierarchy, convention and the status quo are valued.**

Neoclassical Architecture tends to be ordered, balanced, symmetrical (eg. Christopher Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral—)

the emphasis on reason leads to the precepts of eighteenth-century humanism, which set up the values that facilitate the French Revolution.

**The values are logical by-products of the move into a guilt culture**

A helpful **listing of some of these humanist notions** are analysed in Mary Klage's introduction to postmodernism:

- 1. There is a stable, coherent, knowable self.** This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal—no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates.
- 2. This self knows itself and the world through reason,** or rationality, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form.
- 3. The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is "science,"** which can provide universal truths about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.
- 4. The knowledge produced by science is "truth," and is eternal.**
- 5. The knowledge/truth produced by science** (by the rational objective knowing self) **will always lead toward progress and perfection.** All human institutions and practices can be analysed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.
- 6. Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true,** and therefore of what is right, and what is good (what is legal and what is ethical). **Freedom consists of obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.**
- 7. In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same** as the good and the right (and the beautiful); **there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right** (etc.).
- 8. Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge.** Science is neutral and objective; scientists, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased (fair-imparziale) rational capacities, must be **free to follow the laws of reason, and not be motivated by other concerns** (such as money or power).

9. Language, or the mode of expression used in producing and disseminating knowledge, must be rational also.

To be rational, language must be transparent; it must function only to represent the real/perceivable world which the rational mind observes.

There must be a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them (**between signifier and signified**).

**These are some of the fundamental premises of humanism, or of modernism.** They serve—as you can probably tell—to justify and explain virtually all of our social structures and institutions, including democracy, law, science, ethics, and aesthetics.

### **Romanticism (1789-1832)**

marked by a number of revolutions and other transformative changes in society:

**The American Revolution** begins in **1775**; the **Declaration of Independence** is drafted in **1776**.

**The French Revolution** occurs in **1789**, which led (in France) to the **execution of the king and also aided the subsequent rise of the middle classes**.

The fact of the revolution in France led many in England to fear a similar revolution in Britain, either by the middle classes or, worse, the lower classes. **The rise of the middle classes in England and America. Both countries became increasingly reliant for their wealth on industry and business.** This fact also led, of course, to **the rise of capitalism as the predominant way to conceive of business relations.** In Britain, this rise culminated in **the British Reform Bill of 1832, which extended the vote to the richest members of the middle classes.** Over the course of the **nineteenth century, the vote would gradually be extended to all men (although the vote would not be extended to women until the twentieth century).**

**The Industrial Revolution and the related changes occurring in the scientific exploration of the physical world, which increasingly ushered in our modern forms of medicine and science.**

**Urbanization:** as industry became the major money-maker in the nineteenth century and as new machines made farm labour less necessary, people entered the cities in droves to begin working in factories and sweat shops. The resulting pollution led in England to the "London fog," which was really the result of coal pollution mixing with the humidity in the air.

**Increasing literacy rates:** more and more middle-class men, middle-class women and even lower-class people were learning how to read. This expansion of the reading audience made it possible for our modern mass market to become possible. That is, the book industry could now make a profit by selling inexpensive books to an extremely large number of consumers. This change was made possible by both the increase in literacy rates and the new technologies (Stanhope iron press, Fourdrinier continuous paper-making machine, pulp paper, Plaster-of-Paris method of stereotyping) that made possible the production of cheap books in mass quantities.

**Some of the effects of these changes on the idea of the subject include the following:**

As **each individual subject is seen as valued, a new emphasis is placed on internal feelings and inspiration,** leading William Wordsworth in his Prelude **to move epic form away from external battles and inwards towards the formation of an individual subject.**

The rise of urbanization leads to a counter-reaction: **artists begin to extol the value of nature, including sublime landscapes like mountains and oceans that would have been considered forbidding by early-eighteenth-century aestheticians.**

the formation of the Romantic hero (Promethean, sometimes Satanic, solitary, self-exiled, in search of extremes in nature and the self, tormented by inner guilt). **We are now firmly entrenched in guilt culture, which is reflected in the revolutionary changes in politics, ideology, and state institutions.**

⇒ therefore see the rise of autobiography as a genre (with Wordsworth's *Prelude* as itself a good example).  
⇒ the rise of the novel in this period as an emergent mass market begins to target the newly literate middle classes.

Some other elements of Romanticism include:

1. **a valuation of originality over convention.** J. M. W. Turner's paintings are a good example, since, in paintings like "Snowstorm—Steamboat Off a Harbor's Mouth" (1842) —on the left—he is so far ahead of his time that he is anticipating impressionism by decades. (Although the painting was first exhibited in 1842, Turner is usually associated with Romantic sensibilities.)
2. **a desire to champion the rights of the oppressed,** , the rebellious power of the poet. In Blake's representation, the represented poet-prophet even goes so far as to take on the divine power of God.
3. **a new emphasis on individualism,** expressed, for example, in the solitude of the individual in Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer" . Indeed, in Friedrich's painting, we are no longer given a subject on display but a nondescript figure. We are made to acknowledge not the subject's social self but the effect of the landscape on the mind of the subject, who does not even turn his face to us.

**We are thus also invited to take on his point-of-view; we are invited to experience his emotions before the grandeur of the scene before him.** There is also a sense here that **the subject is noteworthy not because of any social position but because of what he experiences and does** (in this case, the achievement of this isolated and dangerous prospect). By this token and thanks to the anonymity of the turned-away subject, we are made to conclude **that anyone can achieve the same experience.** We are not given the trappings of a particular class or rank but **the experiences of a human being.** The isolated nature of this figure further serves **to underline his individuality, compared to the clear signs of human society in eighteenth-century representations of people and landscape.**

4) **a desire to abandon oneself to nature, emotion, and the body.** The sublime exemplifies this desire to push oneself to the limits of bodily and perceptual endurance in order to experience new and alternate states of being. **The use of drugs is another example** of this general tendency, best explored perhaps in de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and in Coleridge's Preface to "Kubla Kahn."

5) **a degree of irrationality.** Indeed, **the abandonment of oneself to emotion, mentioned in the previous point, often included the exploration of irrational states of mind,** as in, for example, Henry Fuseli's "The Nightmare" (1781). Indeed, de Goya goes so far as to suggest, in his etching, "**The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,**" that the Age of Reason by necessity includes, perhaps even entails, a shadow side of Unreason. **The new valuation of sublime landscapes is similarly an effort to appreciate that in nature which is not utilitarian, not ordered, not balanced, not symmetrical.**

### **Victorian Period:(1832-1898)**

The increasing rise in literacy rates and the **final establishment of the middle class as the dominant ruling class, not to mention the formation of a mass market, help to establish the novel as the middle class' primary artistic form in this period.**

**The Victorian novel in many ways turns away from the exotic experimentation of Romantic poetry and instead offers a critique of Romantic ideals,** thus helping to effect **a transition into the bourgeois, domestic values of the period (approximately 1832-1898).** By implicitly critiquing certain aspects of the Romantic ideology (the search for transcendence, the Romantic hero, the self-exile of the creator, the Promethean myth), **a number of domestic novels instead underscore such middle-class values as domesticity, duty, responsibility, work, conservative social reform, empiricism, utilitarianism, and realism.**

**Victorian architecture** (particularly the centrality of the hearth and the separation of rooms by hallways) **helps to establish spaces where private identity and domesticity can be established.**

A primary figure of the period is **the "Angel in the House," the perfect self-sacrificing and self-disciplining domestic housewife**, who is implicitly or explicitly **contrasted to the demonic whore-woman.**

The woman in Hunt's painting, *The Awakening Conscience* is poised between these two possibilities for female subjectivity.

**Modernism (1898-1945). Modernity and Modernism:**

**"Modernity" is as slippery a term as "postmodernity";** indeed, some scholars date the "modern subject" as emerging as early as the Renaissance.

Usually, though, when someone refers to **the "modern period," they mean the period from about 1898 to the second world war.**

**A time of wild experimentation in literature, music, art, and even politics.**

**There is still a belief among many thinkers in concepts such as truth and progress;**

this is the period that saw such revolutionary political movements as **fascism, nazism, communism, anarchism**, and so on.

"isms" abound as various groups establish bold manifestos outlining their visions for an improved future. Manifestos about artistic form are just as widespread and, like the political manifestos, often radically different one from the next (eg. **surrealism, dadaism, cubism, futurism, expressionism, existentialism, primitivism, minimalism**, etc.).

In general, this radicalism is driven by a sense that Enlightenment values may be suspect.

**Modernists therefore participate in a general questioning of all the values held dear by the Victorian period (narrative, referentiality, religion, progress, bourgeois domesticity, capitalism, utilitarianism, decorum, empire, industry, etc.).**

Many modernists also tend to take the Romantic exploration of the irrational, the primitive, and the unconscious to darker extremes, as in, for example, **Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, or Antonin Artaud's surrealism.**

In general, **there is a fear that things have gone off track** (a feeling exacerbated by World War I) and that we need to follow radically new paths if we are to extricate ourselves. Some of the **features of modernist aesthetic work include:**

- 1) **self-reflexivity** (cfr. Pablo Picasso's *Woman in the Studio* (1956))
- 2) **an exploration of psychological and subjective states**, combined sometimes with **a rejection** of realism or objective representation (as in expressionism or stream-of-consciousness writing).
- 3) **alternative ways of thinking about representation** (eg. Cubism, which attempts to see the same event or object from multiple perspectives at the same time).



4) **radical experimentation in form**, including a breakdown in generic distinction (eg. Between poetry and prose, with the French prose poem and the poetic prose of Gertrude Stein or Virginia Woolf as prominent examples).

5) **fragmentation in form and representation** (eg. T. S. Eliot's "*The Wasteland*").

6) **extreme ambiguity and simultaneity in structure** (eg. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which offers the same events from radically different focalized perspectives).

7) **some experimentation in the breakdown between high and low forms** (eg. T.S. Eliot's and J. Joyce's inclusion of folk and pop-cultural material in their work), **though rarely in a way that is easily understandable by the general masses.**

8) **the use of parody and irony in artistic creation** (eg. James Joyce's *Ulysses* or the creations of the surrealists and dadaists), though again **in a way that tends to be difficult for the mass consumer to understand.**

### **Postmodernity (1945-present). Postmodernity and Postmodernism:**

One of the problems in dealing with postmodernism is in **distinguishing it from modernism.**

In many ways, **postmodern artists and theorists continue the sorts of experimentation that we can also find in modernist works, including the use of self-consciousness, parody, irony, fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, simultaneity, and the breakdown between high and low forms of expression.**

In this way, **postmodern artistic forms can be seen as an extension of modernist experimentation;** however, others prefer to represent **the move into postmodernism as a more radical break**, one that is **a result of new ways of representing the world including television, film** (especially after the introduction of color and sound), **and the computer.**

**Many date postmodernity from the sixties when we witnessed the rise of postmodern architecture;** however, some critics prefer to see **WWII as the radical break from modernity, since the horrors of nazism (and of other modernist revolutions like communism and Maoism) were made evident at this time.**

The very term "**postmodern**" was, in fact, **coined in the forties by the historian, Arnold Toynbee.**

**Some features that distinguish postmodern aesthetic work from modernist work are as follows:**

- 1) **extreme self-reflexivity.** Postmodernists tend to take this even further than the modernists but in a way that tends often **to be more playful, even irreverent** (as in Lichtenstein's "Masterpiece").

This same **self-reflexivity can be found everywhere in pop culture**, for example the way the *Scream* series of movies has characters debating the generic rules behind the horror film. **In modernism, self-reflexivity tended to be used by "high" artists in difficult works** (eg. Picasso's painting above); **in postmodernism, self-reflexive strategies can be found in both high art and everything from Seinfeld to MTV.** In postmodern architecture, this effect is achieved by keeping visible internal structures and engineering elements (pipes, support beams, building materials, etc.).

- 2) **irony and parody.** Connected to the former point, is the tendency of postmodern artists, theorists, and culture **to be playful or parodic.** (.) **Warhol and Lichtenstein are, again, good examples** Pop culture and media advertising abound with examples; indeed, shows or films will often step outside of mimetic representation altogether in order to parody themselves in mid-stride

- 3) **a breakdown between high and low cultural forms.** Whereas some modernists experimented with this same breakdown, even the modernists that played with pop forms (eg. Joyce and Eliot) tended to be extremely difficult to follow in their experimentations. **Postmodernists by contrast often employ pop and mass-produced objects in more immediately understandable ways, even if their goals are still often complex** (eg. Andy Warhol's commentary on mass production and on the commercial aspects of "high" art through the exact reproduction of a set of Campbell's Soup boxes).

We should, however, keep in mind that Warhol is here clearly following in the modernist tradition of "ready-mades," initiated by Marcel Duchamp, who used everyday objects in his art exhibits (including, for example, a urinal for his work, Fountain) .

**4) retro.** Postmodernists and postmodern culture tend to be especially fascinated with styles and fashions from the past, which they will often use completely out of their original context. Postmodern architects for example will juxtapose baroque, medieval, and modern elements in the same room or building. In pop culture, think of the endlessly recycled tv shows of the past that are then given new life on the big screen (Scooby-Doo, Charlie's Angels, and so on). Jameson and Baudrillard tend to read this tendency as a symptom of our loss of connection with historical temporality.

**5) a questioning of grand narratives.** Lyotard sees the breakdown of the narratives that formerly legitimized the status quo as an important aspect of the postmodern condition.

Of course, modernists also questioned such traditional concepts as law, religion, subjectivity, and nationhood; what appears to distinguish postmodernity is that such questioning is no longer particularly associated with an avant-garde intelligentsia.

Postmodern artists will employ pop and mass culture in their critiques and pop culture itself tends to play with traditional concepts of temporality, religion, and subjectivity. Think of the popularity of queer issues in various media forms or the tendency of Madonna videos to question traditional Christianity ("Like a Prayer"), gender divisions ("What It Feels like for a Girl"), capitalism ("Material Girl"), and so on.

**6) visuality and the simulacrum vs. temporality.** Given the predominance of visual media (tv, film, media advertising, the computer), both postmodern art and postmodern culture gravitate towards visual (often even two-dimensional) forms, as in the "cartoons" of Roy Lichtenstein.

A good example of this, and of the breakdown between "high" and "low" forms, is Art Spiegelman's Maus, a Pulitzer-prize-winning rendition of Vladek Spiegelman's experiences in the Holocaust, which Art (his son) chooses to present through the medium of comics or what is now commonly referred to as the "graphic novel."

Another symptom of this tendency is a general breakdown in narrative linearity and temporality. Many point to the style of MTV videos as a good example. As a result, Baudrillard and others have argued (for example, through the notion of the simulacrum) that we have lost all connection to reality or history.

This theory may help to explain why we are so fascinated with reality television. Pop culture also keeps coming back to the idea that the line separating reality and representation has broken down (Wag the Dog, Dark City, the Matrix, the Truman Show, etc.).

**7) late capitalism.** There is also a general sense that the world has been so taken over by the values of capitalist acquisition that alternatives no longer exist. One symptom of this fear is the predominance of paranoia narratives in pop culture (Bladerunner, X-Files, the Matrix, Minority Report). This fear is, of course, aided by advancements in technology, especially surveillance technology, which creates the sense that we are always being watched.

**8) disorientation.** MTV culture is, again, sometimes cited as an example as is postmodern architecture, which attempts to disorient the subject entering its space. Another example may be the popularity of films that seek to disorient the viewer completely through the revelation of a truth that changes everything that came before (the Sixth Sense, the Others, Unbreakable, the Matrix).

**9) secondary orality.** Whereas literacy rates had been rising steadily from the introduction of print through the modern period, postmodern society has seen a drastic reversal in this trend as more and more people are now functionally illiterate, relying instead on an influx of oral media sources: tv, film, radio, etc..

Culture still very much relies on print to create these media outlets (hence the term secondary orality); however, it is increasingly only a professional, well-educated class that has access to full print- and computer-literacy. An ever larger percentage of the population merely ingests orally the media that is being produced.

### **POSTMODERN PLAYERS**

**LINDA HUTCHEON**, in her books *The Politics of Postmodernism* and *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, has outlined some of the major aesthetic features of postmodern literature, particularly of what she terms "historiographic metafiction." Her discussion of parody and irony has also been highly influential, helping scholars and students alike think through the value and effectiveness of various postmodern artistic forms. She thus provides a positive spin on the strategies of postmodern works.

**JEAN BAUDRILLARD** is the sobering critical counter-voice to Hutcheon's theories. Painting a bleak picture of the future, Baudrillard critiques what he sees as the emptying out of all materiality in a culture increasingly governed, he argues, by the postmodern simulacrum.

**FREDRIC JAMESON**, like Baudrillard, offers a critical view of our present age, in particular the dangers of multi-national capitalism. He also warns against the dangers that result from what he sees as our society's loss of connection with history and with the suffering of the oppressed.

Adapted from: <<https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/postmodernism/modules/introduction.html>>