

A readiness to consider that meanings are intertextual, and that it may be necessary to examine a broad range of discourses in order to explain music, its contexts and the way it functions within them. For example, questions of music and sexuality cannot be considered in isolation from political, biological, psychological, psychoanalytical and aesthetic discourses. There may be no intention, however, to document each area comprehensively.

A readiness to respond to the multiplicity of music's contemporary functions and meanings (for example, the fusions of practices variously described as 'time-based arts' and 'multimedia arts'). This may be achieved by adopting the epistemological position and methodology outlined above (one requiring intertextual study and the blurring of discipline boundaries); it contrasts with a narrow discipline-based study of music as performance art or as composition (typically represented by the printed score).

POSTMODERNISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Most contributions to the debate on **postmodernism** agree that whatever else it is or might be, postmodernism has something to do with the development of popular culture in the late twentieth century in the advanced capitalist democracies of the West. That is, whether postmodernism is seen as a new historical moment, a new sensibility or a new cultural style, popular culture is cited as a terrain on which these changes can be most readily found.

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE ORIGINS OF POSTMODERNISM

It is in the late 1950s and early 1960s that we see the beginnings of what is now understood as postmodernism. In the work of the American cultural critic, Susan Sontag (*Against Interpretation* (1966)), we encounter the celebration of what she calls a 'new sensibility'. As she explains: 'One important consequence of the new sensibility [is] that the distinction between "high" and "low" culture seems less and less meaningful.'

The postmodern 'new sensibility' rejected the cultural élitism of **modernism**. Although it often 'quoted' popular culture, modernism was marked by a deep suspicion of all things popular. Its entry into the museum and the academy as official culture was undoubtedly made easier (despite its declared antagonism to 'bourgeois philistinism') by its appeal to, and homologous relationship with, the élitism of class society. The response of the postmodern 'new sensibility' to modernism's canonization was a re-evaluation of popular culture. The postmodernism of the 1960s was therefore in part a populist attack on the élitism of modernism. It signalled a refusal of what Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide* (1986) calls 'the great divide . . . [a] discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture'. Moreover, according to Huyssen, 'To a large extent, it is by the distance we have travelled from this "great divide" between mass culture and modernism that we can measure our own cultural **postmodernity**.' The American and British pop art movement of the 1950s and the 1960s,

with its rejection of the distinction between popular and high culture, is postmodernism's first cultural flowering. As pop art's first theorist Lawrence Alloway explains:

The area of contact was mass produced urban culture: movies, advertising, science fiction, pop music. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as a fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically. One result of our discussions was to take Pop culture out of the realm of 'escapism', 'sheer entertainment', 'relaxation', and to treat it with the seriousness of art (quoted in John Storey, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1997)).

Seen from this perspective, postmodernism first emerges out of a generational refusal of the categorical certainties of high modernism. The insistence on an absolute distinction between high and popular culture came to be regarded as the 'unhip' assumption of an older generation. One sign of this collapse can be seen in the merging of art and pop music. For example, Peter Blake designed the cover of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*; Richard Hamilton designed the cover of their 'white album'; Andy Warhol designed the cover of the Rolling Stones' album, *Sticky Fingers*.

POPULAR CULTURE IN THE DEBATE ON POSTMODERNISM

By the mid-1980s, the postmodern 'new sensibility' had become a condition and for many a reason to despair. According to Jean-François Lyotard the postmodern condition is marked by a crisis in the status of knowledge in Western societies. This is expressed as incredulity towards 'metanarratives', such as God, Marxism, scientific progress. Steven Connor (*Postmodernist Culture* (1989)) suggests that Lyotard's analysis may be read 'as a disguised allegory of the condition of academic knowledge and institutions in the contemporary world'. Lyotard's 'diagnosis of the postmodern condition is, in one sense, the diagnosis of the final futility of the intellectual'. Lyotard is himself aware of what he calls the contemporary intellectual's 'negative heroism'. Intellectuals have, he argues, been losing their authority since 'the violence and critique mounted against the academy during the sixties'. Iain Chambers (*Popular Culture* (1988)) makes much the same point but from a different perspective. He argues that the debate over postmodernism can in part be understood as 'the symptom of the disruptive ingression of popular culture, its aesthetics and intimate possibilities, into a

previously privileged domain. Theory and academic discourses are confronted by the wider, unsystemized, popular networks of cultural production and knowledge. The intellectual's privilege to explain and distribute knowledge is threatened.'

Like Chambers, Angela McRobbie (*Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994)) welcomes postmodernism, seeing it as 'the coming into being of those whose voices were historically drowned out by the (modernist) metanarratives of mastery, which were in turn both patriarchal and imperialist'. Postmodernism, she argues, has enfranchised a new body of intellectuals; voices from the margins speaking from positions of **difference**: ethnic, gender, class, sexual preference; those whom she refers to as 'the new generation of intellectuals (often black, female, or working class)'. Kobena Mercer (*Welcome to the Jungle* (1994)) makes a similar point, seeing postmodernism as in part an unacknowledged response to 'the emerging voices, practices and identities of dispersed African, Caribbean and Asian peoples [who have] crept in from the margins of postimperial Britain to dislocate commonplace certainties and consensual "truths" and thus open up new ways of seeing, and understanding'.

For Jean Baudrillard (*Simulations* (1983)), hyperrealism is the characteristic mode of postmodernity. In the realm of the **hyperreal**, the 'real' and the imaginary continually implode into each other. The result is that reality and what Baudrillard calls '**simulations**' are experienced as without difference – operating along a roller-coaster continuum. Simulations can often be experienced as more real than the real itself – 'even better than the real thing', in the words of the U2 song.

The evidence for hyperrealism is said to be everywhere. For example, we in the West live in a world in which people write letters addressed to characters in soap operas, making them offers of marriage, sympathizing with their current difficulties, offering them new accommodation, or just writing to ask how they are coping with life. Television villains are regularly confronted in the street and warned about the possible future consequences of not altering their behaviour. Television doctors, television lawyers and television detectives regularly receive requests for advice and help. Baudrillard calls this 'the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV'.

John Fiske claims in *Media Matters* (1994) that postmodern media no longer provide 'secondary representations of reality; they affect and produce the reality that they mediate'. Moreover, in our postmodern world, all events that 'matter' are media events. He cites the example of the arrest of O. J. Simpson: 'Local people watching the chase on TV

went to O. J.'s house to be there at the showdown, but took their portable TVs with them in the knowledge that the live event was not a substitute for the mediated one but a complement to it. On seeing themselves on their own TVs, they waved to themselves, for postmodern people have no problem in being simultaneously and indistinguishably livepeople and mediapeople.' These people knew implicitly that the media do not simply report or circulate the news, they produce it. Therefore, in order to be part of the news of O. J. Simpson's arrest, it was not enough to be there, one had to be there on television. In the hyperreal world of the postmodern, there is no longer a clear distinction between a 'real' event and its media **representation**. In the same way, O. J. Simpson's trial cannot be neatly separated into a 'real' event that television then represented as media event. Anyone who watched the proceedings unfold on TV knows that the trial was conducted at least as much for the television audience as it was for those present in the court. Without the presence of the cameras this would have been a very different event indeed.

Fredric **Jameson** is an American Marxist cultural critic who has written a number of very influential essays on postmodernism. According to his account postmodernism is a culture of pastiche, disfigured by the 'complacent play of historical allusion'. Postmodern culture is 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum'. Rather than a culture of pristine creativity, postmodern culture is a culture of quotations. Instead of 'original' cultural production, we have cultural production born out of other cultural production. It is a culture 'of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense'. A culture of images and surfaces, without 'latent' possibilities, it derives its hermeneutic force from other images, other surfaces. Jameson acknowledges that modernism itself often 'quoted' from other cultures and other historical moments, but he insists that there is a fundamental difference – postmodern cultural **texts** do not just quote other cultures, other historical moments, they randomly cannibalize them to the point where any sense of critical or historical distance ceases to exist – there is only pastiche.

Perhaps his best-known example of the postmodern culture of pastiche is what he calls the 'nostalgia film'. The category could include a number of films from the 1980s and 1990s: *Back to the Future I and II*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Rumble Fish*, *Angel Heart*, *Blue Velvet*. He argues that the nostalgia film sets out to recapture the atmosphere and stylistic peculiarities of America in the 1950s. But the nostalgia film is

not just another name for the historical film. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Jameson's own list includes *Star Wars*. Now it might seem strange to suggest that a film about the future can be nostalgic for the past, but as Jameson explains in 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (H. Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture* (1985)), *Star Wars* 'does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, [it reinvents] the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period'.

Films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Independence Day* and *Robin Hood*, *Prince of Thieves* operate in a similar way to evoke a sense of the narrative certainties of the past. In this way, according to Jameson, the nostalgia film either recaptures and represents the atmosphere and stylistic features of the past and/or recaptures and represents certain styles of viewing of the past. What is of absolute significance for Jameson ('Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* (1984)) is that such films do not attempt to recapture or represent the 'real' past, but always make do with certain cultural myths and stereotypes about the past. They offer what he calls 'false realism', films about other films, representations of other representations (what Baudrillard calls simulations). In this way, history is effaced by 'historicism . . . the random cannibalisation of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion'. Here we might cite films like *True Romance* or *Pulp Fiction*. More than this, Jameson insists that our awareness of the play of stylistic allusion 'is now a constitutive and essential part' of our experience of the postmodern film. Again, it is an example of a culture 'in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history'. This relates to a second stylistic feature Jameson identifies, what he calls schizophrenia. The schizophrenic, he claims, experiences time not as a continuum (past–present–future), but as a perpetual present, which is only occasionally marked by the intrusion of the past or the possibility of a future. The 'reward' for the loss of conventional selfhood (the sense of self as always located within a temporal continuum) is an intensified sense of the present – what Dick Hebdige, in *Hiding the Light* (1988), calls 'acid perspectivism' (suggesting the experience is similar to that of 'tripping' on LSD).

To call postmodern culture schizophrenic is to claim that it has lost its sense of history (and its sense of a future different from the present). It is a culture suffering from 'historical amnesia', locked into the discontinuous flow of perpetual presents. The temporal culture of modernism has given way to the spatial culture of postmodernism.

TWO EXAMPLES OF POSTMODERN POPULAR CULTURE

A discussion of postmodernism and popular culture might highlight any number of different cultural forms and cultural practices: television, music video, film, pop music, advertising. I will consider here two prime examples: pop music and television.

POSTMODERN POP MUSIC

As Frith and Horne point out in *Art into Pop* (1987), 'Pop songs are the soundtrack of postmodern daily life, inescapable in lifts and airports, pubs and restaurants, streets and shopping centres and sports grounds'. Connor argues that pop music is perhaps 'the most representative of postmodern cultural forms'.

Jameson distinguishes between modernist and postmodern pop music, making the argument that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones represent a modernist moment, against which punk rock and new wave can be seen as postmodern. In 'Popular Music and Postmodern Theory' (*Cultural Studies* (1991)), Andrew Goodwin quite correctly argues that for various reasons this is a very difficult position to sustain. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones are as different from each other as together they are different from, say, the Clash and Talking Heads. In fact, 'it would be much easier to make an argument in which the distinction is made between the "artifice" of the Beatles and Talking Heads and the "authenticity" of the Rolling Stones and the Clash'.

Goodwin considers a number of ways of seeing pop music and pop music culture as postmodern. Perhaps the most cited aspect is the technological developments that have facilitated the emergence of sampling. He acknowledges the parallel with some postmodern theorizing, but suggests that what is often missed in such claims is the way in which sampling is used. For example, he claims that sampling has a 'historicizing function'; it is often deployed 'to invoke history and authenticity'. To call this process pastiche is to miss the way 'contemporary pop opposes, celebrates and promotes the texts it steals from'.

Rap is perhaps the best example of sampling being used in this way. When asked in an interview to name *the* black means of cultural expression, the African-American cultural theorist Cornel West answered, 'music and preaching'. He went on to say:

[R]ap is unique because it combines the black preacher and the black music tradition, replacing the liturgical ecclesiastical setting with the African polyrhythms of the street. A tremendous *articulateness* is

syncopated with the African drumbeat, the African funk, into an American postmodernist product: there is no **subject** expressing originary anguish here but a fragmented subject, pulling from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product (John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1997)).

One can make similar claims for British rap as postmodern. Angela McRobbie, as we noted earlier, claims that postmodernism appeals 'to what might be called the new generation of intellectuals (often black, female, or working class)'. The Ruthless Rap Assassins, for example, are black and working class: three street intellectuals articulating their politics with 'a funky North Hulme beat'. They engage in postmodern pla(y)giarism, not as an end in itself, but to construct compelling critiques of the everyday racism of British society. They would certainly reject Jameson's claim that their work is an example of postmodern pastiche. Their **intertextual** play of quotations is not the result of aesthetic exhaustion, but the telling combination of found fragments from a cultural repertoire which by and large denies their existence. These are not the fragments of modernism shored against aesthetic ruin, but fragments combined to condemn those who have sought to deny them a voice within British culture.

Perhaps the best way to think of the relationship between pop music and postmodernism is historically. In most accounts, the moment of postmodernism begins in the late 1950s – the same period as the emergence of pop music. Therefore, in terms of periodization, pop music and postmodernism are more or less simultaneous. This does not necessarily mean that all pop music is postmodern. Using Raymond Williams's model of social formations always consisting of a hierarchy of cultures – 'dominant', 'emergent' and 'residual' – postmodern pop music can be seen as 'emergent' in the 1960s with the late Beatles, and the rock music of the counter-culture, as principal examples, and in the 1970s with 'art school' punk, to become in the late 1980s the 'cultural dominant' of pop music. To see the relationship in this way avoids the either/orism of 'it is all postmodern' or 'none of it is postmodern'. This would allow for the claim that all pop music is in some sense postmodern (potentially so), but that all pop music is not necessarily postmodern.

It is also possible to see the consumption of pop music and the surrounding pop music culture as in itself postmodern. Instead of an approach concerned with identifying and analysing the postmodern text or practice, we might look instead for postmodernism in the emergence of particular patterns of consumption; people who actively seek out and celebrate pastiche. The notion of a particular group of consumers,

people who consume with irony and take pleasure in the weird, is very suggestive. Fred Pfeil, for example, claims, in 'Postmodernism as a "Structure of Feeling"' (C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988)), that in America at least, postmodernism is a particular style of consumption; the way of consuming of a specific social grouping, the professional managerial class. Umberto Eco (quoted in R. Boyne and A. Rattansi, eds., *Postmodernism and Society* (1990)), using Charles Jencks's notion of 'double coding', identifies a similar postmodern sensibility exhibited in an awareness of what he calls the 'already said'. He gives the example of a lover who cannot tell his lover 'I love you madly', and says instead: 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.' We might think also of the hedonistic irony of those for whom flying ducks and garden gnomes are always displayed in knowing inverted commas. Seeing the world in inverted commas can be a way of attacking the normative standards of dominant patterns of taste, but it can also be a means of patronizing those supposedly without taste – those who display their ornaments without the inverted commas.

While academics and other cultural critics argue about whether postmodernism is best understood as text and practice, or as reading formation, the music industry has not been slow to bring text and consumption into combination. There is now a generic/sales category of pop music called postmodern: perhaps the most notable example of this (1988–93) was MTV's programme *Post Modern MTV*. The presenter described the music played on the programme as 'a slightly alternative mix'. This description and the general content of the programme suggested that postmodernism was being used as perhaps little more than another way to market so-called 'indie pop'. This usage has also been taken up by record companies who now market certain performers as postmodern.

POSTMODERN TELEVISION

Television, like pop music, does not have a period of modernism to which it can be 'post'. But, as Jim Collins points out in 'Postmodernism and Television' (R. C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled* (1992)), television is often seen as the 'quintessence' of postmodern culture. This claim can be made on the basis of a number of television's textual and contextual features. If we take a negative view of postmodernism, as the domain of Baudrillardian simulations, then television seems an obvious example of the process – with its supposed

reduction of the complexities of the world to an ever-changing flow of depthless and banal visual imagery. If, on the other hand, we take a positive view of postmodernism, then the visual and verbal practices of television can be put forward, say, as the knowing play of intertextuality (the way one text is inscribed with other texts) and 'radical eclecticism', encouraging and helping to produce the postmodern 'sophisticated bricoleur' (someone who takes pleasure in the intertextuality of a text). For example, a television series like *Twin Peaks*, both constitutes an audience as bricoleurs and in turn is watched by an audience who celebrate its bricolage.

Collins uses *Twin Peaks* as a means of bringing together the different strands of the relationship between postmodernism and television. *Twin Peaks* is chosen because it 'epitomises the multiple dimensions of televisual postmodernism'. He argues that the postmodernism of the series is the result of a number of interrelated factors: David Lynch's reputation as a film maker, the stylistic features of the series, and, finally, its commercial intertextuality (the marketing of related products: for example, *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*). At the economic level, *Twin Peaks* represents an attempt by American network television to win back affluent sections of the television audience lost to cable and video. In this sense, *Twin Peaks* marks a new era in network television's view of the audience. Instead of seeing the audience as an homogeneous mass, the series was part of a strategy in which the audience is seen as fragmented, consisting of different segments – stratified by age, class, gender, geography and race – of interest to different advertisers. Mass appeal now involves attempts to intertwine the different segments to enable them to be sold to different sections of the advertising market. The significance of *Twin Peaks*, at least from this perspective, is that it was marketed to appeal to those most likely to have been tempted away from network television by VCR, cable and cinema. In short, the so-called 'yuppie' generation.

Collins demonstrates this by addressing the way the series was promoted. First, there was the intellectual appeal – Lynch as auteur, *Twin Peaks* as avant-garde television. This was followed by *Twin Peaks* as soap opera. Together the two appeals soon coalesced into a postmodern reading formation in which the series was 'valorised as would-be cinema and would-be soap opera'. This was supported and sustained by the polysemic play (capacity to generate multiple meanings) of *Twin Peaks* itself. The series is, as Collins suggests, 'aggressively eclectic', not only in its use of conventions from Gothic horror, police procedural, science fiction and soap opera, but also in the different ways – from straight to

parody – these conventions are mobilized in particular scenes. Collins also notes the play of ‘tonal variations . . . within and across scenes’ – moving the audience from moments of parodic distance to moments of emphatic intimacy, continually playing with our expectations. Although this is a known aspect of Lynch’s filmic technique, it is also a characteristic ‘reflective of changes in television entertainment and of viewer involvement in that entertainment’. In other words, this fluctuation in generic conventions ‘describes not just *Twin Peaks* but the very act of moving up and down the televisual scale of the cable box. Viewing perspectives are no longer mutually exclusive, but set in perpetual alternation.’ What makes *Twin Peaks* different from other soap operas is not that it produces shifting viewing positions, but that it ‘explicitly acknowledges this oscillation and the suspended nature of television viewing . . . [It] doesn’t just acknowledge the multiple subject positions that television generates; it recognises that one of the great pleasures of the televisual text is that very suspension and exploits it for its own sake.’ In this way, *Twin Peaks* is not a reflection of postmodernism, nor is it an allegory of postmodernism, it is a specific address to the postmodern condition – a postmodern text – and as such it helps to define the possibilities of entertainment in the contemporary capitalist world.

POSTMODERNISM, POPULAR CULTURE AND QUESTIONS OF VALUE

Postmodernism has disturbed many of the old certainties surrounding questions of cultural value. It has become somewhat of a commonplace to demonstrate how canons of value form and re-form in response to the social and political concerns of those with cultural power. To the less watchful eye, the changes often seem insignificant – changes at the perimeters, relative stability at the core – but even when the canonical texts remain the same, how and why they are valued certainly changes. So much so that they are hardly the same texts from one historical moment to the next. As the Four Tops put it, in a slightly different context: ‘It’s the same old song / But with a different meaning since you’ve been gone.’ Or to put it in a less danceable discourse, the cultural text under the sign of the postmodern is not the source of value, but a site where the construction of value – variable values – can take place.

Perhaps the most significant thing about postmodernism for the student of popular culture is the recognition that there is no absolute categorical difference between high and popular culture. This is not to say that one text or practice might not be ‘better’ (for what/for whom,

etc., must always be decided and made clear) than another text or practice. But it is to say that there are no longer any easy reference points that will automatically preselect for us the good from the bad. Some might regard such a situation (or even the description of such a situation) with horror – the end of standards. On the contrary, without easy recourse to fixed categories of value, it calls for rigorous, if always contingent, standards, if our task is to separate the good from the bad, the usable from the obsolete, the progressive from the reactionary. As John Fekete points out in *Life after Postmodernism* (1987): ‘The prospect of learning to be at ease with limited warranties, and with the responsibility for issuing them, without the false security of inherited guarantees, is promising for a livelier, more colourful, more alert, and, one hopes, more tolerant culture that draws enjoyment from the dappled relations between meaning and value.’

Fekete’s point is not significantly different from the argument made by Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation* at the birth of the postmodern ‘new sensibility’. As she explains: ‘From the vantage point of this new sensibility, the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns, of a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible.’

Postmodernism has certainly changed the theoretical and the cultural basis on which to think about popular culture. In fact, the collapse of the distinction (if this is the case) between high and popular culture may signify that at last it may be possible to use the term popular culture and mean nothing more than *culture* liked by many people.