Postmodernism and popular culture

IN THIS CHAPTER I will look at the postmodernist analysis of contemporary popular culture. However, I shall alter the organisation of my discussion slightly from the one used in previous chapters in that I shall be more directly concerned with the empirical claims of postmodernism. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first place, postmodern theory, and its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings in post-structuralism, are relatively recent developments, and have not been as intellectually assimilated as the other theories I have looked at. This means that there are few sources which present clear and readable accounts of postmodern theory. Compounding this problem is the fact that what discussion there has been of postmodernism — and by now there has been a lot – has tended to be theoretical and abstract in character as well as difficult to understand. Compared with this theoretical output, relatively little has been said about postmodernism as an empirical or historical phenomenon.

It is clear that postmodernism has become an issue which has attracted increasing interest and attention in recent years. Judging simply by book titles published either using the term or its equivalents, or making clear their concern with postmodernism, this can readily be seen. The *Books in Print* index shows no book titles published on postmodernism between 1978 to 1981, but 14 published in 1988, 22 in 1989 and 29 in 1990. The *Humanities Index* shows no book titles or books on postmodernism published between 1980 and 1983, but a total of 241 appearing between 1987 and 1991.[1] This does not include books which are not specifically concerned with postmodernism but still discuss it, nor journal articles or coverage in the more popular media. Yet even here two major journals in the social and cultural sciences, *Theory, Culture and Society* and *Screen*, have devoted special issues to postmodernism,[2] while arts programmes have either considered the major themes raised by the debate or looked at specific areas such as architec-ture. Indeed, in the UK postmodernism has come to be a term commonly used in discussions about contemporary architecture.[3]

Despite all this, relatively little has been said about whether postmodernism is emerging in contemporary societies. The debate seems to have been much more involved with the theory of postmodernism rather than with its recognition as an empirical phenomenon. Relatively few writers appear to have asked the question, can we see postmodernism in the world around us? There has, in fact, been a tendency to assume that postmodernism has become widespread in modern societies. However, less attention has been devoted to demonstrating that this is the case.[4] This has been matched, in turn, by the excessive attention given to the problem of defining the term itself.[5]

In this chapter, I shall look at postmodernist theory, and will consider the extent to which postmodernism can be identified empirically in modern societies, popular culture and the mass media being special areas of concern in the debate about postmodernism.[6] This focus on the empirical identification of postmodernism means that the chapter will be organised in terms of the following questions: what is postmodernism?; can it be identified in contemporary popular media culture?; what are some of the reasons advanced for its emergence?; and what kind of critique can be developed of its claims and arguments?

What is postmodernism?

In order to identify postmodernism, the following – by no means exhaustive – set of points summarises some of the most salient features which writers about the phenomenon have chosen to emphasise.[7] I realise that it represents something of a composite picture, but it is more than adequate for the purposes of this chapter.

The breakdown of the distinction between culture and society

First, postmodernism is said to describe the emergence of a social

order in which the importance and power of the mass media and popular culture means that they govern and shape all other forms of social relationships. The idea is that popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. It tries to come to terms with, and understand, a media-saturated society. The mass media, for example, were once thought of as holding up a mirror to, and thereby reflecting, a wider social reality. Now reality can only be defined by the surface reflections of this mirror. Society has become subsumed within the mass media. It is no longer even a question of distortion, since the term implies that there is a reality, outside the surface simulations of the media, which can be distorted, and this is precisely what is at issue according to postmodern theory.

This idea, in part, seems to emerge out of one of the directions taken by media and cultural theory. To put it simply, the liberal view argued that the media held up a mirror to, and thereby reflected in a fairly accurate manner, a wider social reality. The radical rejoinder to this insisted that this mirror distorted rather than reflected reality. Subsequently, a more abstract and conceptual media and cultural theory suggested that the media played some part in constructing our sense of social reality, and our sense of being a part of this reality (Curran *et al.*: 1982; Bennett: 1982). It is a relatively short step from this (and one which need not be taken) to the proposition that only the media can constitute our sense of reality. To return to the original metaphor, it is claimed that this mirror is now the only reality we have.

Moreover, linked to this is the notion that in the postmodern condition it becomes more difficult to distinguish the economy from popular culture. The realm of consumption -- what we buy and what determines what we buy – is increasingly influenced by popular culture. Consumption is increasingly bound up with popular culture because popular culture increasingly determines consumption. For example, we watch more films because of the extended ownership of VCRs, while advertising, which makes increasing use of popular cultural references, plays a more important role in deciding what we will buy.

An emphasis on style at the expense of substance

A crucial implication of the first point is that in a postmodern world, surfaces and style become more important, and evoke in their turn a kind of 'designer ideology'. Or as Harvey puts it: 'images dominate narrative' (1989; pp. 347–348). The argument is that we increasingly consume images and signs for their own sake rather than for their 'usefulness' or for the deeper values they may symbolise. We consume images and signs precisely becaue they are images and signs, and disregard questions of utility and value. This is evident in popular culture itself where surface and style, what things look like, and playfulness and jokes, are said to predominate at the expense of content, substance and meaning. As a result, qualities like artistic merit, integrity, seriousness, authenticity, realism, intellectual depth and strong narratives tend to be undermined. Moreover, virtual reality computer graphics can allow people to experience various forms of reality at second hand. These surface simulations can therefore potentially replace their real life counterparts.

The breakdown of the distinction between art and popular culture

If the first two points are accepted it follows that for postmodern culture anything can be turned into a joke, reference or quotation in its eclectic play of styles, simulations and surfaces. If popular cultural signs and media images are taking over in defining our sense of reality for us, and if this means that style takes precedence over content, then it becomes more difficult to maintain a meaningful distinction between art and popular culture. There are no longer any agreed and inviolable criteria which can serve to differentiate art from popular culture. Compare this with the fears of the mass culture critics that mass culture would eventually subvert high culture. The only difference seems to be that these critics were pessimistic about these developments, whereas some, but not all, postmodern theorists are by contrast optimistic.

A good example of what postmodernist theory is getting at is provided by Andy Warhol's multi-imaged print of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting *The Mona Lisa*. This example of pop art echoes the argument we looked at above of Walter Benjamin's (1973), as well as an earlier jokey version of the same painting, by Marcel Duchamp (McShine: 1989). The print shows that the uniqueness, the artistic aura, of the Mona Lisa is destroyed by its infinite reproducibility through the silk screen printing technique employed by Warhol. Instead, it is turned into a joke – the print's title is 'Thirty are better than One'. This point is underlined by the fact that Warhol was renowned for his prints of famous popular cultural icons like Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley as well as of everyday consumer items like tins of Campbell's soup, Coca-Cola bottles and dollar bills.

One aspect of this process is that art becomes increasingly integrated into the economy both because it is used to encourage people to consume through the expanded role it plays in advertising, and because it becomes a commercial good in its own right. Another aspect is that postmodern popular culture refuses to respect the pretensions and distinctiveness of art. Therefore, the breakdown of the distinction between art and popular culture, as well as crossovers between the two, become more prevalent.

Confusions over time and space

It is argued here that contemporary and future compressions and focusing of time and space have led to increasing confusion and incoherence in our sense of space and time, in our maps of the places where we live, and our ideas about the times in terms of which we organise our lives. The title and the narratives of the *Back to the Future* films capture this point fairly well. The growing immediacy of global space and time resulting from the dominance of the mass media means that our previously unified and coherent ideas about space and time begin to be undermined, and become distorted and confused. Rapid international flows of capital, money, information and culture disrupt the linear unities of time, and the established distances of geographical space. Because of the speed and scope of modern mass communications, and the relative ease and rapidity with which people and information can travel, time and space become less stable and comprehensible, and more confused and incoherent (Harvey: 1989, part 3).

Postmodern popular culture is seen to express these confusions and distortions. As such, it is less likely to reflect coherent senses of space or time. Some idea of this argument can be obtained by trying to identify the locations used in some pop videos, the linear narratives of some recent films or the times and spaces crossed in a typical evening of television viewing. In short, postmodern popular culture is a culture *sans frontières*, outside history.

The decline of metanarratives

The loss of a sense of history as a continuous, linear 'narrative', a clear sequence of events, is indicative of the argument that, in the postmodern world, metanarratives are in decline. This point about the decline of metanarratives arises out of the previous arguments we have noted. Metanarratives, examples of which include religion, science, art, modernism and Marxism, make absolute, universal and all-embracing claims to knowledge and truth. Postmodernist theory is highly sceptical about these metanarratives, and argues that they are increasingly open to criticism. In the postmodern world they are disintegrating, their validity and legitimacy are in decline. It is becoming increasingly difficult for people to organise and interpret their lives in the light of metanarratives of whatever kind. This argument would therefore include, for example, the declining significance of religion as a metanarrative in postmodern societies. Postmodernism has been particularly critical of the metanarrative of Marxism and its claim to absolute truth, as it has been of any theory which tries to read a pattern of progress into history.[8]

The consequence of this is that postmodernism rejects the claims of any theory to absolute knowledge, or of any social practice to universal validity. So, for example, on the one hand

there are movements in the natural or hard sciences away from deterministic and absolute metanarratives towards more contingent and probabilistic claims to the truth, while on the other hand people appear to be moving away from the metanarrative of life-long, monogamous marriage towards a series of discrete if still monogamous 'relationships' (Harvey: 1989; p. 9; Lash and Urry: 1987; p. 298). The diverse, iconoclastic, referential and collage-like character of postmodern popular culture clearly draws inspiration from the decline of metanarratives.

Contemporary popular culture and postmodernism

I now want to look more closely at some examples of popular culture in order to see if the existence of postmodernism can be detected. Clearly, what follows is by no means systematic or exhaustive. It is necessarily selective and is meant to represent a search for certain elements and trends in popular culture with a view to providing a preliminary assessment of the problems I have posed. It should therefore clarify the nature of postmodernism.

Architecture

This is a particularly appropriate example to use since, during the twentieth century, groups of architects have identified themselves as 'modernist' or 'postmodernist'. These terms have subsequently been used to describe contemporary buildings.[9] The argument here is that modernism, which first came to prominence in the 1920s, has based itself upon a radical rejection of all previous forms of architecture, and has insisted that buildings and architecture have to be created anew according to rational and scientific principles. Functionality and efficiency, high rise, streamlined, glass and concrete structures, and a disregard for the past and for context, have all become its hallmarks. It has sought to reflect, celebrate and entrench the dynamism of industrial modernity through the rational, scientific and technical construction of built space.

Postmodernism in architecture rejects this metanarrative. Its hallmarks are highly ornate, elaborately designed, contextualised and brightly coloured buildings, a stress on fictionality and playfulness, and the mixing of styles drawn from different historical periods in almost random and eclectic fashion. Postmodernism turns buildings into celebrations of style and surface, using architecture to make jokes about built space. Examples of this include Philip Johnson's Grandfather Clock shaped building for AT&T in New York, Charles Moore's Piazza Italia in New Orleans, or Richard Rogers's Lloyds building in the City of London. Rather than build or design according to rational, scientific principles, postmodern architecture is said to proceed according to the context in which the building is to be placed, and to mix together styles both classical (for example, Ancient Roman or Greek) and vernacular (popular cultural signs and icons). It embraces cultural definitions and the superiority of style, bringing together ideas and forms from different times and places. It also rejects the privileged metanarrative of modernist architecture; and the distinction between classical and modernist architecture as art, on the one hand, and vernacular architecture as popular culture, on the other. Las Vegas has therefore, for example, been seen as both an exemplar of and inspiration for postmodern architecture (Venturi *et al.*: 1977).

Cinema

Postmodernist arguments clearly concern the visual, and the most obvious films in which to look for signs of postmodernism are those which emphasise style, spectacle, special effects and images, at the expense of content, character, substance, narrative and social comment. Examples of this include films like *Dick Tracey* (1990) or *9½ Weeks* (1986). But to look only at those films which deliberately avoid realism and sell themselves on their surface qualities can obscure some of the other things which are going on in contemporary cinema.[10] The films directed and produced by Steven Spielberg and his associates, such as the *Indiana Jones* (1981, 1984 and 1989) and *Back to the Future* series (1985, 1989

and 1990), equally display elements of postmodernism since their major points of reference, and the sources they most frequently invoke, are earlier forms of popular culture such as cartoons, 'B' feature science fiction films, and the Saturday morning, movie-house, adventure series people of Spielberg's generation would have viewed in their youth. It is likewise argued that these films appear to stress spectacle and action through their use of sophisticated techniques and relentless pursuit sequences, rather than the complexities and nuances of clever plotting and character development. Sometimes it is suggested that the narrative demands of classical realism are being increasingly ignored by postmodern cinema. Moreover the *Back To The Future* series and other films like *Brazil* (1985) and *Blue Velvet* (1986) are said to be post-modern because of the way they are based on confusions over time and space. Others like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) can be seen to be postmodern because of their deliberate use of distinct (cultural and technical) genres: the cartoon strip and the detective story. Yet others like *Body Heat* (1981) can be claimed to be post-modern because they are parasitic on the cinema's past, recycling – in this example – the crime thriller of the 1940s. They thus engage in a kind of 'retro-nostalgia'. Related to this are films which recycle themselves in a number of sequels once the magic box office formula has been discovered, like the *Rocky* (1976, 1979, 1982, 1985 and 1990) or *Rambo* (1982, 1985 and 1988) films and the many other repeats which could be mentioned. This tendency is argued to be postmodern partly because it ignores the demands of artistic originality and novelty associated with modernism. None the less, it is argued to be postmodern mainly because it goes no further than recycling the recent past, making films which are merely imitations of other films rather than reflections of social reality.

A frequently cited example of the postmodern film is *Blade Runner* (1982) (Harvey: 1989, chapter 18; Instrell: 1992). Amongst the more noticeable characteristics of this film (which is about Los Angeles in the early part of the twenty-first century), we can note how its architectural look, or production design, clearly mixes styles from different periods. The buildings which house the

major corporation have lighting characteristic of contemporary skyscrapers but the overall look of ancient temples, while the 'street talk' consists of words and phrases taken from a whole range of distinct languages. These architectural and linguistic confusions can be said to contribute to an elusive sense of time since we appear to be in the past, the present and the future at the same time. It is a science fiction film which is not obviously futuristic in its design. This effect is accentuated in two ways. First, the 'non-human humans' in the film are not mechanical robots but 'replicants', almost perfect simulations of human beings. Second, the genre of the film is not clear.[11] It has been defined as a science fiction film, but it is also a detective film. Its story unfolds as a detective story, the hero has many of the character traits we associate with the 'tough-guy' policeman or private investigator, and his voice-over, which relates the investigation, draws upon the idioms and tone of *film noir*.

Television

One way of considering television, in the context of the arguments of this chapter, is to view it as a postmodern medium in its own right. Television's regular daily and night-time flows of images and information, bring together bits and pieces from elsewhere, constructing its sequences of programmes on the basis of collage techniques and surface simulations. Equally, there are a number of instructive examples of television programmes which can be used to assess the emergence of postmodernism. For the sake of clarity, I shall confine myself here to one of these examples, the police and crime series *Miami Vice* (1985–1990), although its distinguishing features may be found elsewhere.[12] There are many other examples of television programmes which can be used to assess the claims of postmodernist theory, such as the surreal cult series *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991) and *Wild Palms* (1993).

One of the most important claims made about *Miami Vice* has concerned its reliance upon style and surface. Commentators have noted how it emphasised its visuals and imagery, pointing to the overall look and ambience which the series managed to

achieve. For example, its executive producer, Michael Mann – who subsequently went on to produce the even more 'hyper-real' *Crime Story* (1989) – when asked once about the main rule he worked to when making the programme, is reputed to have replied, 'no earth tones'.[13] The series was carefully designed visually in terms of colour, locations and camera work. When it first came on in America, one critical reponse was to suggest it didn't conform to normal television. This refers to the way it seemed more in keeping with the grander stylistic and adventurous conventions of cinema rather than the cosy, intimate and more 'realistic' routines of television. It was also noticeably different from more seemingly realistic police series like *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1989). It has also been compared with *film noir*. This visual appeal was as crucial to the series as the designer clothes worn by its detectives heroes, and the imaginative day and night-time images of Miami. The visual pleasures derived from style and 'look' – locations, settings, people, clothes, interiors, the city – were a crucial motivation in the making and appreciation of the series. The use of an obtrusive pop and rock music sound track added to these pleasures, representing something of a departure for the police and crime series. More than this, it did not so much reject narrative as such, but rather parodied and stylised the established conventions of the genre, while abounding with self-conscious references to popular culture. For example, the conventions of the gangster film were often parodied, while one episode was a more or less straightforward remake of the western *High Noon* (1952).

Advertising

This example is drawn from television advertising, and is used to see if it is possible to exemplify further the emergence of post-modernism in contemporary popular culture. The argument here is that advertisements used to tell us how valuable and useful a product was. Now, however, they say less about the product directly, and are more concerned with sending up or parodying advertising itself by citing other adverts, by using references drawn from popular culture and by self-consciously making clear their status as advertisements. This argument recognises that advertising is always involved in selling things to people, but suggests that these features distinguish those elements of postmodernism which can be found in contemporary television advertising.

Advertising has, of course, always been seen as a superficial exercise, more involved with surface and style than anything else. But the point at issue is the changing content and tone of advertising, the move away from the simple and direct selling of a product on the basis of its value to the consumer, whatever the visual style and trick effects used. Although the intention is still to sell, it is contended that nowadays the postmodern effect is achieved by seemingly overt efforts within advertising to undermine this purpose. Once Guinness was supposed to be good for us. Now all we see is an actor, in some obscure setting, drinking a glass of Guinness without any positive suggestions being made as to why we should follow suit. Postmodern adverts are more concerned with the cultural representations of the advert than any qualities the product advertised may have in the outside world, a trend in keeping with the supposed collapse of 'reality' into popular culture. The stylish look of advertisements, their clever quotations from popular culture and art, their minisagas, their concern with the surfaces of things, their jokey quips at the expense of advertising itself, their self-conscious revelation of the nature of advertisements as media constructions, and their blatant recycling of the past, are all said to be indicative of the emergence of postmodernism in television advertising.

Pop music

From the point of view of postmodern theory, the recent history of popular music can be seen to be marked by a trend towards the overt and explicit mixing of styles and genres of music in very direct and self-conscious ways.[14] This has ranged from the straightforward remixing of already recorded songs from the same or different eras on the same record, to the quoting and 'tasting' of distinct musics, sounds and instruments in order to create new sub- and pan-cultural identities. Jive Bunny and the Master

Mixers, with their eclectic succession of pop and rock 'n' roll records, are the best example of the former, while the mixing and collage-like constructions of reggae sound systems, rap, house and hip hop are amongst the best examples of the latter. It is also necessary to include in this category the so-called 'art rock' musical innovations and mixing of styles associated with groups like Talking Heads, and performers like Laurie Anderson, together with the self-conscious 'reinvention of disco' by the Pet Shop Boys.

Whatever the respective musical and political merits of these new departures, or the scale of their influence, they can be argued to be postmodern. They are concerned with collage, pastiche and quotation, with the mixing of styles which remain musically and historically distinct, with the random and selective pasting together of different musics and styles, with the rejection of divisions between serious and fun or pop music and with the attack on the notion of rock as a serious artistic music which merits the high cultural accolade of the respectful concert (a trend identified with punk). By contrast, 'modernist' popular music can be understood as an attempt to fashion new and distinct forms out of previous styles. So what was distinctive about rock 'n' roll, for example, was not the fact that it, too, borrowed from and based itself upon already existing musical styles, but that it used these styles to construct something new. Rock 'n' roll, as is commonly suggested, arose out of the cross-cutting influences exerted by country and western, on the one hand, and urban rhythm 'n' blues, on the other. The result was not, it is argued, a postmodern amalgam in which country and rhythm 'n' blues stayed recognisably the same, but a novel and original fusion called rock 'n' roll. Similarly with soul music. This is said to have arisen out of the coming together of gospel and blues within black American culture. Yet again the consequence was said to be something strikingly new and different, not a sound which maintained the relatively separate identities of gospel and blues. Put very simply and crudely the argument about the transition between modernism and postmodernism in pop music can be seen to be associated with the movement from rock 'n' roll in the late 1950s, and the Beatles and Tamla Motown in the 1960s, to Jive Bunny, Music Mixing and 'art rock' and 'straight' pop in the 1980s.

The emergence of postmodernism

So far I have tried to outline what is meant by the term postmodernism, and have shown how elements of it may be found in some leading examples of popular media culture. Just how extensive and general these indications are, however, is something which has to be questioned, as I shall argue in my conclusion. Before that we need to look at another aspect of postmodern theory. This concerns its understanding of the social and historical conditions under which postmodernism emerges.[15] This is bound up with the defining features of postmodernism, and should allow us to clarify further the arguments associated with this theory.

Consumerism and media-saturation

Postmodernism has links with some long-standing ideas about the scale and effects of consumerism and media-saturation as central aspects of the modern development of industrial, capitalist societies. One illustration of this is the attempt to account for the emergence of postmodernism in terms of the argument that during the twentieth century the economic needs of capitalism have shifted from production to consumption. This suggests that once the major need of capitalist societies was to establish their conditions of production. The machines and factories for the manufacturing of goods had to be built and continually updated; heavy industries concerned with basic materials, like iron and steel, and energy, had to be fostered; the infrastructure of a capitalist economy – roads, rail, communications, education, a welfare state, etc. – had to be laid down; and the work force had to be taught the 'work ethic', the discipline required by industrial labour. All this meant that consumption had to be sacrificed to the needs of production.

Once a fully functioning system of capitalist production has been established, however, the need for consumption to grow

begins to emerge, and then people need to acquire a leisure or consumer ethic in addition to a work ethic. Now it would be simple-minded to suggest that consumption is only a fairly recent development in the history of capitalism or that the problems of capitalist production have necessarily been resolved. But the point being made is that in an advanced capitalist society like Britain, the need for people to consume has become as important, if not strategically more important, than the need for people to produce. Increased affluence and leisure-time, and the ability of significant sections of the working class to engage in certain types of conspicuous consumption, have in their turn served to accentuate this process. Hence, the growth of consumer credit, the expansion of agencies like advertising, marketing, design and public relations, encouraging people to consume, and the emergence of a postmodern popular culture which celebrates consumerism, hedonism and style.

In this process the media obviously become more important. The rise of modern forms of mass communications, and the associated proliferation of popular media culture, therefore become central to the explanatory framework of postmodern theory. What is inferred from this is that the mass media have become so central to communication and information flows within and between modern societies (and consequently the popular culture they broadcast and promote has come increasingly to define and channel everyday life in these societies) that they, along with consumerism, have given rise to the characteristic features of postmodernism described above. The world, it is argued, will increasingly consist of media screens and popular cultural images – TVs, VDUs, videos, computers, computer games, personal stereos, adverts, theme parks, shopping malls, 'fictitious capital' or credit – which are part and parcel of the trends towards postmodern popular culture.

New middle-class occupations and consumer markets

Consumerism and media-saturation have been conceived of as overly abstract processes with their own autonomous logics, but they can be given some social grounding if changes in the class and

occupational structures are taken into consideration.[16] This means it can be argued that the increasing importance of consumption and the media in modern societies has given rise to new occupations (or changed the role and character of older ones) involved with the need to encourage people to consume, more frequently, a greater number and variety of commodities. The idea here is that some groups have to be held responsible for producing postmodernism, however unaware they may be about what they are doing. Hence it can be suggested that certain 'postmodern' occupations have emerged which function to develop and promote postmodern popular culture. These occupations involve the construction of postmodernism. They are claimed to be both creating and manipulating or playing with cultural symbols and media images so as to encourage and extend consumerism. This argument tries to account for the growing importance of occupations like advertising, marketing, design, architecture, journalism and television production, others like accountancy and finance associated with increased consumer credit, and those like social work, therapists of one kind or another, teachers, lecturers and so on, associated with the definition and selling of notions of psychological and personal fulfilment and growth. All these occupations are said to be among the most important in determining the taste patterns for the rest of the society. They exert an important influence over other people's life-styles, and values or ideologies (while expressing their own as well).

These new middle-class occupations, which cater for the variety of consumer markets already existing or in the process of being formed, are crucial to the development of a postmodern popular culture. They entail being conversant with the media and popular culture, both of which have to be used and manipulated in order for the appropriate occupational work to be carried out. This is further linked to the proposition that the cultural ideologies and identities of these occupational groups are becoming increasingly postmodern. At least, certain significant sections within these groups can be described in this way. Both the nature of the work they carry out and the need to distinguish themselves as a status group from others in the hierarchy of taste can be seen

as being conducive to their elaboration of a postmodern ideology and life-style. Their quest for cultural power leads them towards postmodernism and away from the cultures of other classes, such as the high culture of the traditional middle-class intelligentsia.[17]

The erosion of collective and personal identities

The interpretation of identity, be it personal or collective, has become a crucial issue in the debates raised by postmodern theory.[18] The specific claims that have been made about identity in these debates furnish us with another set of reasons for the emergence of postmodernism. The overall case that can be examined here does not claim that a simple process of decline has occurred but that a limited and dependable set of coherent identities have begun to fragment into a diverse and unstable series of competing identities. The erosion of once secure collective identities has led to the increasing fragmentation of personal identities. It is argued that we have witnessed the gradual disappearance of traditional and highly valued frames of reference in terms of which people could define themselves and their place in society, and so feel relatively secure in their personal and collective identities. These traditional sources of identity – social class, the extended and nuclear family, local communities, the 'neighbourhood', religion, trade unions, the nation state – are said to be in decline as a result of tendencies in modern capitalism like increasingly rapid and wide-scale rates of social change. 'Economic globalisation', for example, the tendency for investment, production, marketing and distribution to take place on an international basis above and beyond the nation state or the local community, is seen as an important reason for the gradual erosion of these traditional sources of identity. Transnational economic processes erode the significance of local and national industries and, thereby, the occupational, communal and familial identities they could once sustain.

This argument then goes on to suggest that these problems are exacerbated because no comparable and viable forms emerge which can take the place of traditional sources of identity. No new institutions or beliefs arise to give people a secure and coherent sense of themselves, the times in which they live and their place in society. Those features of contemporary societies which are novel or which represent the prominence of previously secondary trends, like the demands of consumerism or watching television, are not thought to offer satisfactory and worthwhile alternatives. In fact, they encourage the features associated with postmodernism. Consumerism by its very nature is seen to foster a self-centred individualism which disrupts the possibilities for solid and stable identities. Television has similar effects because it is both individualistic and universal. People relate to television purely as individual viewers cut off from wider and more genuine social ties, while television relates back to people as individual and anonymous members of an abstract and universal audience. In both cases, the wider collectivities to which people might belong, and the legitimate ideas in which they might believe, tend to be ignored, eroded or fragmented. Neither consumerism nor television form genuine sources of identity and belief, but since there are no dependable alternatives, popular culture and the mass media come to serve as the only frames of reference available for the construction of collective and personal identities.

The limits of postmodernism

In assessing the emergence of postmodernism within contemporary popular culture I have not been able to present an extensive survey, but it is clearly possible to find examples which clarify the claims of postmodernist theory. I now want to question these claims. There are two ways in which I shall try to do this: one will be to take a critical look at some of the central arguments of postmodern theory; the other will be to examine critically the claims it makes about a particular area of popular culture.

First of all, the idea that the mass media take over 'reality' clearly exaggerates their importance. The mass media are important, but not that important. This assertion sometimes seems to be more in keeping with an ideology of the media which arises from the interests of those working in, and controlling, the media. It has

less to commend it as a serious analysis in view of its failure to identify the precise character of this importance, and to provide empirical grounds for the claims it makes. It also ignores the point that other factors, like work and the family, contribute to the construction of 'reality'. The related idea that popular media culture regulates consumption rests upon unsubstantiated assumptions about people's behaviour as consumers. Equally, it fails to recognise how useful the commodities are which people buy, and neglects the fact that the ability to consume is restricted by economic and cultural inequalities. Moreover, the notion that 'reality' has imploded inside the media such that it can only be defined by the media is equally questionable. Most people would probably still be able to distinguish between the 'reality' created by the media, and that which exists elsewhere. Of course, if reality has really 'imploded' into the media, how would we know it has happened? We could only rely on the media to tell us that it had, but why should we trust them?

Those theorists who think postmodernism is emerging, seem to be echoing many of the anxieties and fears expressed much earlier by mass culture and Frankfurt School critics.[19] This is evident in a number of the arguments put forward by postmodern theory. For example, the ideas that collective and personal identities are being eroded, that modern popular culture is a trash culture, that art is under threat and that the enlarged role of the mass media allows them to exercise a powerful ideological influence over their audiences, all provide clear evidence for this point; neither are cultural pessimism, and concern over working class consumption, anything new; nor is the implied distinction between a modernist past when the world was a better place to live in, and the postmodern present and future when things can only go on getting worse and worse. Not only is too much significance given to consumerism and the power of media like television, but the claims that are made are rarely substantiated by any evidence. In addition, little attention is given to such things as the nature of people's daily lives, popular attitudes towards consumption, the continuity of identities and the possibility of alternative identities emerging in the course of time.

Another major difficulty with postmodernism lies in its assumption that metanarratives are in decline. In the first place, what is postmodernism, after all, if it is not another metanarrative? It presents a definite view of knowledge and its acquisition, together with a general account of the significant changes it sees occurring in modern societies. It presumes to tell us something true about the world, and knows why it is able to do this. It is therefore difficult to see why postmodernism should not be thought of as a metanarrative. If it is indeed another metanarrative, how can they be in decline? It could be suggested that postmodernism is the last of the metanarratives. But would it be possible to argue this except on the basis of another metanarrative since it involves making a claim to know something? It would seem that, far from metanarratives being in decline, they are something we cannot do without. However, because postmodernism has to be regarded as a metanarrative despite its protestations, it does not follow that we are justified in continuing to think in terms of established metanarratives like Marxism and modernism.

It is apparent that developments in technology and communications have had significant effects on the speed with which information, images and people can be transported around the world. They are therefore in line with postmodernist claims about space and time. As a result, the sense that people now have of time and space must have changed when compared with previous generations. But again the opportunities to experience these changes may be unequally distributed. They may be more available to some classes and occupational groups as opposed to others. Moreover, why should these changes be qualitatively distinct from those associated with the invention of the aeroplane and the cinema? We need to know about the history within which these changes can be understood, and not succumb to a surprisingly positivistic faith in technology. If we are going to talk about changes then we must presumably engage in some kind of historical evaluation. Another reason to be sceptical of the claims of postmodern theory is the fact that the effects of these dramatic changes in time and space upon people's lives remain relatively unexamined, the changes in people's consciousness

seemingly being assumed to follow automatically from techno-
logical changes.

Postmodernist claims about the breakdown of the distinction
between art and popular culture have a certain plausibility, partic-
ularly since they seem to relate to the practices and ideologies of
certain occupational groups. However, these claims appear to be
largely confined to these groups. There are, in fact, a number of
difficulties with the idea that such a breakdown is occurring.
First, if art and popular culture can still be distinguished from
each other, then how far can the breakdown be said to have
gone? Second, postmodern culture has been distinguished from
other types of culture. Therefore the possibility of using criteria
to distinguish between cultural products does not disappear with
postmodernism. If we take the postmodern argument at face value,
the potential for cultural discrimination must remain under post-
modernism. Otherwise, how can postmodernism be distinguished
from other types of culture? Third, the postmodern popular cul-
ture produced by certain occupational groups within the cultural
industries is clearly not just concerned with a celebratory populism
or a know-nothing relativism. The quotes and references that are
part of this process are meant to appeal to those 'clever' enough
to spot the source of the quote or reference. Rather than dismant-
ling the hierarchy of aesthetic and cultural taste, postmodernism
erects a new one, placing itself at the top. Lastly, it can be argued
that most people do discriminate in their cultural consumption
and appreciation, even if they do not do so in order to conform with
the demands of the hierarchy of art and mass culture, or of post-
modernism.

If we look at the examples of popular culture I discussed
briefly above, there appear to be changes in the direction of post
modernism, most notably in the areas of architecture and adver-
tising. However, it is difficult to apply this conclusion equally to
all areas of popular culture. In particular, its relevance to an
account of changes in the cinema is limited, and I shall conclude
by looking briefly at this example. No doubt there are aspects
of contemporary cinema which can be called postmodern, but a
number of significant problems emerge if the history of cinema is

taken into consideration.[20] The changes which can be called post-
modern, described above, either are not as novel as is claimed or
are simply misunderstood.

Popular cinema has always been concerned with presenting
spectacle to a large audience. From its very early days, cinema
appealed to its audience on the basis of the spectacular events it
could bring to the screen. To say that postmodernism is concerned
with spectacle is to forget this history and to misconstrue the
nature of cinema. Obviously, the spectacles screened today are dif-
ferent, in terms of what can be achieved, from those at the turn of
the century. None the less, given these different technical and
cultural contexts, there is no reason to suppose that one era has
been more concerned with spectacle than another. Furthermore,
stories remain an important aspect of the appeal of contemporary
cinema. The *Back to the Future* films may exemplify postmodern
claims about confusions over time and space but they are equally
held together by strong and complex narratives. Likewise, a spec-
tacular film like *Blade Runner* has a story about the misguided
attempts by science to replicate human life, and the tragic fates
its 'replicants' suffer, a theme which goes back to Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein novel.

From the postmodern point of view, contemporary cinema is
seen to be indulging in nostalgia, living off its past, ransacking
it for ideas, recycling its images and plots and cleverly citing it in
self-conscious postmodern parodies. This view also implies that
postmodern popular culture is identifiable by its self-conscious
awareness of its status as a cultural product. Yet again, this exag-
gerates the novelty of these kinds of developments and miscon-
strues their character and their history. The repeat and the sequel
have been part of the way cinema has worked from its earliest
stages. Initially it made use of other forms of popular culture like
the stage, the newspaper and the novel, and very soon these media
fed off each other for ideas and stories. As it grew, cinema remade
films that had been made before. For example, that model of
narrative realism *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) was in fact the third
film to be made from Hammett's original novel, while between
1908 and 1920 six film versions of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr*

Jekyll and Mr Hyde were released (Maltin: 1991; Wood: 1988). Similarly, the history of cinema throws up numerous examples of the film sequel, including those which involved a whole series of repeats. The *Sherlock Holmes* (1922–1985), *Tarzan* (1918–1989) and *Thin Man* (1934–1947) series are obvious examples, but a cursory survey will reveal a number of other cases (Maltin: 1991). Similarly, *King Kong* (1933) spawned *Son of Kong* (1933), and *Mighty Joe Young* (1949). Moreover, it can be cited as an example of a film which reflects self-consciously upon its status as a cultural product, due to the way it deals directly with film-making and spectacle (Kawin: 1986).

Insofar as it is possible to generalise, film genres can be said to depend upon a delicate blend of repetition and surprise. As Neale has argued, the historically variable character of genres, the mixing together of genres, the difficulty of allocating particular films to specific genres, together with the confused or hybrid nature of film genres as a whole, are all features to be found throughout the history of cinema rather than being unique to recent films (Neale: 1990). Similarly, the parody of genres has a much longer history than is allowed for by postmodern theory, as does the period film which tries to reconstruct an earlier period of history in a highly stylised manner. Westerns and gangster films readily come to mind as relevant examples in this context. Neither is what postmodern theory has to say about nostalgia films, those films said to be parasitic on the past history of cinema, that convincing.[21] There are clearly films which can be called nostalgia films. But many films which are evaluated in this way seem to be more importantly concerned with reinventing and reviving genres, and establishing their contemporary relevance, rather than repeating what has gone before. For example, *Body Heat* (1981) is some-times seen as a nostalgia film but, far from merely recycling the past, it is a film which tries to update cinematic images and motifs about sex, desire and fate.

This discussion has tried to indicate some of the difficulties confronted by postmodernism and its interpretation of modern cinema. The signs of postmodernism to be detected in certain areas of contemporary popular culture may well be quite partial and specific. It is reasonable to suppose that an examination of other areas will reveal problems similar to those arising from my brief survey of cinema. While it cannot be dismissed completely, postmodernism seems subject to severe theoretical and empirical limitations. It is certainly inadequate as a basis for developing a sociology of popular culture.

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