

# **POSTMODERNISM**

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Philosophy and the Arts

Edited by  
Hugh J. Silverman

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**HUGH J. SILVERMAN**

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**Edited by Hugh J. Silverman**

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POSTMODERNISM  
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# INTRODUCTION: THE PHILOSOPHY OF POSTMODERNISM

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Hugh J. Silverman

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Postmodernism has no special place of origin. The meaning and function of postmodernism is to operate at places of closure, at the limits of modernist productions and practices, at the margins of what proclaims itself to be new and a break with tradition, and at the multiple edges of these claims to self-consciousness and auto-reflection. Postmodernism is not as such a new style of creating artworks, of synthesizing novel self-expressions, and of justifying theoretically its aesthetic practices. Postmodernism does not open up a new field of artistic, philosophical, cultural, or even institutional activities. Its very significance is to marginalize, delimit, disseminate, and decenter the primary (and often secondary) works of modernist and premodernist cultural inscriptions.

Postmodernist thinking offers to re-read the very texts and traditions that have made premodernist and modernist writing possible—but above all it offers a reinscription of those very texts and traditions by examining the respects in which they set limits to their own enterprises, in which they incorporate other texts and traditions in a juxtapositional and intertextual relation to themselves. Postmodernist thinking involves rethinking—finding the places of difference within texts and institutions, examining the inscriptions of indecidability, noting the dispersal of signification, identity, and centered unity across a plurivalent texture of epistemological and metaphysical knowledge production.

Postmodernism brings the modernist hegemony to closure. It examines the ends, goals, hopes of modernist activity, situating

it in its context of premodernist frameworks. However, just as the post-impressionism of Van Gogh and Cézanne was not an *attack upon and rejection of* the impressionism of Monet, Renoir, Manet, Degas, and Pissarro, so too postmodernism is not a simple refusal to accept modernist principles and perspectives. Rather postmodernism extends but also brings to a close the fundamental tenets and activities of a modernist outlook. This means that the lines of demarcation between modernism and postmodernism are not well-defined. A region of indeterminateness prevails such that although the Joyce of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, along with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and Kafka's *The Trial*, are major documents of modernist literary production, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* along with Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, Beckett's *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable*, and Borges's *Fictions* take on features of a postmodern textual practice. Indeed to be able to identify particular literary works as postmodernist as opposed to modernist is itself the kind of enterprise invoked by the modernist critic seeking to distinguish modernism from romanticism (just as romantics were set off against—and set themselves off against—those of the classical style). But postmodernism in fiction, for instance, is not the successor to modernism—rather it is modernism taken to its extremes. Postmodernism signals the end of what has become commonplace and ordinary in the modernist outlook. Postmodernist literary practice operates at the edge of the modernist manner.

To be modern is to break with tradition, to interrupt the endless reiteration of classical themes, topics, and myths, to become self-consciously new, to attend to the *modes* of the times, to offer a critique of the conditions of one's own culture and society, to represent reality—not as it is—objectively and devoid of evaluation, but rather as it is *experienced*—subjectively and with the transcendental or critical consciousness available especially to the artist. To be modern is to “break with the past” and to “search for new self-conscious expressive forms.” Whether the “new self-expressive forms” are abstract like those of Kandinsky and Pollock, or geometrical like those of Mondrian and Josef Albers, or alienated like those of Edvard Munch and Max Beckmann, or fanciful like those of Giacometti and Paul Klee, they all give shape to the concept of modern art. The modern artist claims to

take a privileged view of the social and psychological concerns of the day. Modern man and modern woman are plagued with uncertainties, despair, bureaucratization, and mechanization. Their concern is how to cope with such solidifications and preoccupations of modern times—the Charlie Chaplin film whose title gave a name to Sartre’s new journal in 1945 is but a caricature of the modern condition. And the modern artist has an interior consciousness that knows how to express the realities of industrial society. Critics and professors of art or literature extol the virtues of the modern artist; they praise his or her abilities to perceive better than the rest of us; and they look to the artist for guidance as to how to articulate (if not diagnose or cure) the modern predicament. But the *postmodern* artist has no such privileged status. The postmodern artist is on the margins of things in such a way that it is not the artist who counts but rather the paintings and inscriptions themselves. And these texts and performances achieve their significance and value in their intertextual relations with other texts and performances. The postmodernist text *is* by its difference from other productions—including critical writings and alternate aesthetic or cultural genres.

The modern music of Schönberg, Bartok, Weber, and, in a different way, Stravinsky, offers a radical break with the classical styles of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Where the romantic expressions of Berlioz and Mahler gave something other than the prior classical styles, they nevertheless could not be considered sufficiently radical, sufficiently modern, to be “a true break” with tradition. When Wagner introduced his music dramas, he brought together many different art forms. Although the medieval *Nibelungenlied* was the basis for his Ring cycle, just as the Romantic poets latched onto Macpherson’s (imaginary and mythical sixth-century) Ossian for their inspiration, Wagner created what was hailed by Verlaine and others as *definitely* modern. Certainly he was not providing the sort of operatic work that Rossini, Mozart, Puccini, or even Verdi offered. Here was something solidly new, unquestionably modern, very much *à la mode*, praised not only by the *Revue Wagnerienne* but also by Nietzsche’s 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. Nietzsche’s disappointment—as elaborated later in *The Case of Wagner* (1888)—was indicative of the self-delimitation of Wagnerian modernism. But Nietzsche—identified by Michel Foucault in

1966 as a threshold figure, along with Mallarmé—was himself a spokesman for the postmodernism that had come too early, before its time, *avant la lettre*. Nietzsche's ultimate turn—away from Wagner, his view that Wagnerism was not, after all, the proper work of his "philosopher" Dionysus—was an early inscription of modernism's self-circumscription. But postmodernism has no place of origin—it can inscribe itself in different places, at various limit points—and Nietzsche's rereading of Wagner is only one such locus.

But what is *postmodernist thinking*? Philosophers are wont to cite Bacon and Galileo, Descartes and Malebranche, as the beginnings of modern thought. The idea that man can be an "interpreter of nature" (Bacon) or an observer of the universe through an instrument such as the telescope (Galileo), that one can reshape and control the world through science—inaugurates the "modern" world view. Descartes's further specification of the self or subject as able to distrust bodies and extended substances, as a thinking substance whose existence can be affirmed by a clear and distinct idea of its own activity, as offering a set of rules for directing the mind—these are all proclaimed to be distinctively "modern." Although not engaged *as such* in the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* (which Boileau and other seventeenth-century critics ascribed to their new writers), Descartes nevertheless asserted his rejection of the scholastic style of philosophizing. Thus while literary debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—in France for instance—focused on the dispute between the ancients and the moderns, philosophers set the so-called modernist views of rationalism and empiricism into motion. The dichotomy between the philosophical claim that Descartes, Hume, and Kant are modern philosophers while literary scholars proclaim Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Kafka as modern is only one indication of the effects of discipline segregation. But that Molière, La Rochefoucauld, and Fontenelle are sometimes called "modern" suggests that even among literary disciplines the extent of cooperation in naming is not very significant. Similarly, modern *art* is clearly post-romantic or more definitively post-post-impressionist, namely futurist, fauvist, abstract expressionist, cubist, surrealist, dadaist, and so forth.

While the arts do not correspond with respect to what counts as modern, where philosophy interprets itself as modern since

the late Renaissance, what is to be said of nineteenth-century philosophy? Surely Hegel, Marx, Mill, and Comte are also modern—but they are modern with a twist, or several twists. Dialectic, the utilitarian principle, and positivism give a new look to the Kantian critical philosophy. So if rationalism, empiricism, critical philosophy, dialecticism, utilitarianism, Marxism, and Comtean positivism are all “modern” philosophies, then what sense does modernist thinking have? And in what respect can it be said that modernist thinking—when self-delimited—establishes the condition for a postmodernist position? If it can be said—as I shall here—that postmodernist thinking *enframes*, *circumscribes*, and *delimits* modernist thinking, then where are the places in which modernism in philosophy comes to an end? This closure occurs in many places and in many different ways. Postmodernism enframes modernism without identity or unity. It is fragmented, discontinuous, multiple, and dispersed. Where modernism asserts centering, focusing, continuity—once the break with tradition has already occurred—postmodernism de-centers, enframes, discontinues, and fragments the prevalence of modernist ideals. But this self-delimitation does not occur all at once. Indeed, the coordinate philosophical practices of the early twentieth century reaffirm, reconstruct, and then set the stage for their own self-circumscription. The determination of the ends of metaphysics and the paths of thinking is also the framework for the closure of modernism.

Concomitant with—and perhaps even antecedent to—the reign of twentieth-century modernist writers like Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Kafka, certain philosophies of consciousness achieve dominance in a variety of different contexts. In concert with William James’s characterization of lived time as a “stream of consciousness,” and Husserl’s “phenomenology of internal time-consciousness,” Freud developed a view of the psychic realm which is comprised both of consciousness and of unconscious fields. Each of these philosophies of consciousness is also a theory of self-consciousness and self-reflection. The Kierkegaardian call to individual subjectivity is defined by James, Bergson, Husserl, and Freud as a field available for scrutiny, investigation, and detailed inventory. One can examine one’s own field of consciousness and describe, both temporally and spatially, the flow of conscious experience as distinct from the objective, em-

pirical data of the external world. But not that many philosophers of the twentieth century were favorably disposed to the idea of a “ghost in the machine” (as Ryle, in 1949, called it). Wittgenstein (in his earlier incarnation) wanted to remain silent about such matters. And Sartre (1936) discovered that the transcendental ego, which Husserl so steadfastly maintained (phenomenologically) at the heart of conscious life, could not be found—at least not *in* consciousness. For Sartre the ego was an object of consciousness, out there in the world, available for investigation just like any other thing. Consciousness, for Sartre (1943), was at best not anything at all, only pure freedom without any content. So along with the development of a modernist theory of self-consciousness, there are also the very seeds of its demise—in Ryle, in Sartre, and in Heidegger.

Heidegger does not provide the closure that the postmodernist will want to call for. Lacan and Derrida—to name some notable signatures—take the circumscription to its further stages of development. Heidegger’s way is to call for the end of philosophy (1961, 1966). Once philosophy sets its own limits, rereads its traditions from the time of the Greeks, it can demarcate what it would be for philosophy to accomplish the tasks it sets out for itself. If philosophy could achieve, through its acts of interpretation, an understanding of philosophical writers who sought to account for the essence of truth, the disclosure of truth, the uncovering of what has remained hidden over the centuries, then the path of thinking might become evident. Hegel had proclaimed that one could bring about the end of philosophy. Philosophy could bring its own activity to absolute knowledge—the full and complete synthesis would thereby be achieved. The *telos* or goal of philosophy would be the finalization of the movement toward the place where all knowledge is encompassed by its own activity. Heidegger sought to find the place at the end of philosophy where thinking might happen. But thinking can occur only where there is a place for the disclosure of truth. For Heidegger, truth can be disclosed only where difference is located. This difference is the ontico-ontological difference where (in his 1927 version) *Dasein* is interpretation and where (in the 1950s) language speaks.

Heidegger marks the shift from a theory of consciousness and self-consciousness to a theory of language. Sartre has no place

for language until the late 1940s and 1950s. Merleau-Ponty had already spoken of the embodied and gestural expression of language in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), but in the late 1940s, when he began to read (and lecture on) Saussure, he incorporated the idea of a “spoken speech” and a “speaking speech” as a sign. With Merleau-Ponty, the language of the speaking subject is the elaboration of an embodied sign system. But Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language is not yet a theory of textuality. When Roland Barthes (1953) provides a critique of Sartre’s concept of literature (1947), he sets forth a theory of writing *at degree zero*, i.e., no longer wrapped up in a complex discourse of subjectivity and authorship. Barthes proposes a theory of writing as revolutionary and yet nonhistoricist, a theory of writing which is informed by style and period but not tied down or limited to them. When Barthes later moves to a theory of the text (in the 1970s with *The Pleasure of the Text*, for instance), he sets the stage for a postmodernist theory of textuality—differential, scriptive, and semiotic—which also marks in turn the writings of Derrida, Deleuze, and Kristeva. And these are just some of the names that will figure largely in this and other volumes in the *Continental Philosophy* series.

Furthermore the essays in this third volume of the series address the very question of the limitations and delimitations that postmodernism marks out. The volume itself is organized into two unequal sections. The first raises some general theoretical questions about postmodernism—“Problematics” as we call them here—while the second attends to particular “Sites,” namely the various arts themselves (and the philosophical reading of them). In the first part, such themes as the “time of postmodernism” (Taylor), the “language of postmodernism” (Scott), the “contradictory character of postmodernism” (Kuspit), and the “politics of postmodernism” (O’Neill) are each taken up in turn and given special attention. The various inroads offered in the first part open up spaces of discourse rather than foreclosing further consideration.

In the second part, particular “sites,” as Roland Barthes might have called them, are identified and elaborated in considerable detail. Here one finds specific readings of “architecture” (Wat-

son), "painting" (Olkowski), "literature" (Bruns), "theatre" (McGlynn), "photography" (Weiss), "film" (Wurzer and Silverman), "television" (Seitz), "dance" (Levin), and "fashion" (Faurischou). While each elaboration is different, some common themes recur. Matters of alterity, inscription, difference, discourse, and desire—to name a few—are repeated in each site.

The contributors to this volume are themselves incorporated into the whole enterprise. Some are well-known names from a variety of disciplines, including Donald Kuspit from the art criticism world, Mark Taylor from the domain of a/theology, Charles Scott, Wilhelm Wurzer, and David Michael Levin from among the postmodernist postphenomenologists, John O'Neill from radical theoretical sociology, and Gerald Bruns from the hermeneutical literary theorists. And while this list is not exhaustive of those who have contributed to the volume, the essays of the others will speak for themselves and for their relation to official philosophical practice. All of the contributors to this volume operate in relation to some important dimension of continental philosophy and its contemporary context.

While the postmodern debate operates in many corners of current intellectual spaces, the November 6th, 1988, front-page *New York Times Book Review* article by Todd Gitlin (entitled "Hip-Deep in Post-modernism") marks the significance that this set of concerns has achieved. And while Gitlin waxes eloquent when he claims that "post-modernism is more than a buzzword or even an esthetic," and when he goes on to affirm that it is "a way of seeing, a view of the human spirit and an attitude toward political as well as cultural possibilities," he is nevertheless opening up the frame for further consideration of its indifferences, discontinuities, splicings, surface-plays, self-decenterings, and dispersals. The essays in this volume of *CP* come at these multiplicities in order to articulate their diversity and to give a sense of the postmodernist frame.

As to the crafting of the volume itself, the work of the assistant editors is especially important. The series could not succeed without their devotion and commitment to seeing it through. The original trio of J Barry, James Hatley, and Brian Seitz have begun to establish their own names in concert with the growth of *CP*. James Clarke, who joined us in the fall of 1987, devoted endless hours helping to bring this volume to fruition—most

notably while the editor was teaching at the University of Leeds (England) throughout the spring of 1988 and while he was conducting research in Vienna during the subsequent summer. And although their names do not appear yet on the editorial page, Nina Belmonte and Jeff Gaines have already put in their share of hours, thought, and energy to the *CP* project, including this very volume. The editor cannot overstate his appreciation for the extensive contribution of all the assistant editors. And of the associate editors, the contributions of Forrest Williams and Stephen Watson are also gratefully acknowledged. While Watson offers an essay for this volume, the work of Forrest Williams behind the scenes is equally valuable. The Philosophy Department at SUNY/Stony Brook continues to provide xerox facilities and we are glad to express our gratitude for this not insignificant contribution.

The encouragement of Stratford Caldecott of Routledge has been immeasurable. Now that he has left the company, he will be sorely missed by those of us who benefited from his wisdom and good judgment. If *CP-III* were to be dedicated to anyone, it should surely be Stratford—in profound appreciation. In the wake of his departure, we are fortunate to have the interest, support, and growing commitment of Maureen MacGrogan who has followed the series for the last couple of years from the New York office. We are delighted that she will be working with us in the future.

*CP* is also its readers as well as its contributors. We hope that they will increase in number and that this volume will entice others to join in. *CP* readers make the series come alive—indeed offer it the *site* that matters. To the company of those already incorporated, we are glad for their support. To those who are new to it we offer our warm welcome.

Hugh J. Silverman, *Editor*

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