

GENERAL POSTMODERN REVISIONS

End of the Grand Narratives: The postmodern is built on reconsiderations of concepts and beliefs that have for centuries created a sense of coherence and certainty for human beings. The dismantling of these beliefs begins with the rejection of *grand narratives*: key philosophical systems, each developed as a unitary attempt to explain how the world works. They are considered “grand narratives” because their adherents assert that they contain truths that are universal and ahistorical. These grand narratives include religion, Marxism, capitalism, psychoanalysis, history as inevitable progress, evolution as the descent of Man.

So, what is left when we remove these grand narratives? Instead of belief systems that transcend time and space, we rely on local narratives and contingent theories. Where grand narratives posited universal social and cultural unity (as a fact and an ideal), the postmodern emphasizes disunity and diversity.

Postmodern Time: Classic histories present time as a coherent series of events and suggest that the result is continual improvement and progress. The postmodern, on the other hand, sees history as **teleology**: not an objective analysis of the past but as a **story** that cherry-picks events to support the explanation that the historian believes to be true.

One result of this rejection of the historical model of causality is a collapse of past/present/future into the Now. This makes experiential sense, since we experience each of these times in the present. One consequence of this view is the idea that dividing the past into distinct and discrete periods is inaccurate and irrelevant. (Michel Foucault, for example, argues that recovery of the past is better reconceived as archaeology.) As a result, sequence does not equal consequence, and anachronism—as when a Roman soldier in a film wears a wristwatch (a minor example)—is no longer a problem, but an allowable representation of the subjective experience of time.

Postmodern signification: Classical views of language see it as a relatively stable system of precise meanings (embodied by the dictionary). However, in postmodern discussions of language (linguistic or pictorial), a linguistic **sign** has no inherent meaning. Meaning is always contextual. (Remember that you are a context, too.)

Meaning is always based on difference, on what a sign is not. So, for example, we understand masculinity by comparing it to what we understand about femininity.

A sign is composed of the **signifier** and the **signified**. The signifier is the material representation of a thing: a photo, a typed word, a visual symbol. The signified is the meaning that that signifier conveys to the reader/viewer.

This reconception of language has implications for language’s ability to communicate and for a text’s ability to impose meaning on the reader/viewer.

Postmodern Representation: Classical views of representation (realism, mannerism) respect the idea that there is a pro-filmic reality and that film should reflect that reality more or less accurately. The postmodern view, however, is that what is on the screen are signifiers, and, as such, they present themselves rather than representing some external reality. (Remember that this is why we restrict the use of “realistic” to describe cinematic style: what the images onscreen look like, rather than how they behave or how they compare to our real existence.)

Once the image is detached from a real-world antecedent, it becomes what postmodernists call a **simulacrum**: it may be similar to something that might actually exist, but it only represents itself.

The Self: Our comfortable existence within one of the grand narratives, our conventional sense of time, and our uncritical acceptance of language-as-truth allow us to feel that we have a stable and coherent personality. This confidence in a stable self is undermined by the postmodern assault on each one of those traditional certainties. The result can be distressing, but it can also be liberating.

POSTMODERNISM AND ART

Applying these conceptual revisions to art undermines traditional notions of textuality, meaning, and originality.

Textuality and Meaning: The classical critical paradigm considered the text as a self-contained entity that should be detached from its authorial and sociopolitical context so that it could be more cleanly analyzed and deciphered. However, once language comes to be seen as porous, subjective, and contingent, the borders of the text become permeable.

Meaning is then seen as the effect of **intertextuality**, the relationship that the reader/viewer creates between a text and other texts. Intertextual relationships are often hinted at via the inclusion within the text of **allusions** to other works, but the reader/viewer can also create intertextual relationships. Allusions, which may range from oblique references to explicit quotes, create a dual layer of meaning and thus a bifurcated or two-tiered audience: those who recognize the source, and those who don't.

Intertextuality as the creator of meaning is why we never describe a work of art as *unique*. If a work were truly unique, it would correspond to no other texts. Therefore, we would not be able to decode it at all.

Originality: The redefinition of textuality as intertextuality compromises the classical notion of originality: no work of art is composed in a vacuum, *ex nihilo*. A work of art swims in the same water as the influences that your experience creates for it, and those influences affect the meaning that you derive from it.

In the classical definition, the label of *originality* is applied only to a singular work of art that has been created by one person. This one-of-a-kind object's specialness confers a quasi-religious aura to it. (On this, read Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.")

In the postmodern, however, originality is produced by bricolage. **Bricolage** means creating something new out of whatever you have on hand. Types of bricolage are **replication**, **recycling**, and **recombination**. *Replication*, of course, means repeating something that worked before. *Recycling*, remaking the old, includes elements that come from various historical periods, creating a vague sense of diegetic time. *Recombination* mixes genre types, creating **hybrid genres**. All of these ways of creating new texts became popular in Hollywood as more studio executives who had experience in TV programming took over the studios. The key point here is that these repeated, recycled, recombined, and hybrid elements do not lose their original meaning when they are inserted in a new text.