

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE POSTWAR PERIOD- ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE COLD WAR

As Europe was beginning to recover from the devastation of a Second World War, the United States emerged as a global power asserting its role as a leading economic and political power. During the war, American industry expanded and continued to expand as in the wake of WWII America invaded South Korea, and established its influence in the postwar world through the ideological warfare with the Soviet Union known as the Cold War (a term used by George Orwell in 1945 in an article where he anticipated the outcome of WWII). The opposition between Soviet communism and Western capitalism grew as the United States aided substantially the reconstruction of Western European countries in the years 1947-8. The decade of the 1950s saw the consolidation of the Cold War propaganda that polarised East and West with both powers promoting and propagandising their technological, economic and scientific progress. As Soviet propaganda promoted the image of the progressive mass and was 'editing out' repression, the United States were promoting and exporting American consumerism, and materialism, editing out conformism and a repressive conservatism and anti-communist rage. The 1950s came to be known as the Eisenhower Era, Eisenhower who was the commander of the Allied forces in the War, served as president between 1953-1961.

Against the backdrop of a polarised political climate, nuclear armament and the red scare, the United States also emerged as a major player in the cultural field. The dialogue with Europe that informed the emergence of the first New York avant-garde and the shaping of a distinctly American modernism in the years of the First World War was resumed as European artists, writers and thinkers fled the European War and found refuge yet again in New York. Abstract Expressionism was the first American movement to gain international acclaim, and as New York's artistic establishments gained in authority in matters of art, New York emerged as the cultural centre that Paris had been before WWII.

The term New York School retrospectively describes the Abstract Expressionist artists, and poets that without so much having a group programme or the identity of a distinct poetic movement were essentially bound by friendships and a shared attitude towards the modernist poetic establishment, the growing conformism of American society, a detached attitude towards the emergence of the more outspokenly radical counter-culture of the Beat poets, and the more difficult experimentalism of the Black Mountain poets.

Jackson Pollock became the iconic persona of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s; Pollock grew up in the American West, and moved to New York in 1930 and studied with Thomas Hart Benton—regionalist painter employed on the WPA federal projects—at the Art Students League; Pollock earned a wage from the WPA too. His early work had regionalist influences; it was through contact with the paintings and the ideas of the Surrealists about automatism and the unconscious, and his interest in native American art that Pollock moved towards abstraction and the 'drip' paintings of the 1950s that made him famous (dripping paint straight from the can on a canvas lain on a floor instead of standing on an easel).

Through the uninterrupted flow of the drawing and later on through 'dripping,' Pollock assimilated Surrealist automatism into a style that came to be identified as distinctly American through its exploration of physical immediacy and a sense of moral and emotional urgency. The work in Pollock's own work is a space where 'energy and motion [are] made visible.' Pollock suffered from alcoholism and died in a car accident in 1956.

UNDERSTANDING POSTMODERNISM:

FROM Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1991)

By mid-century, the word *fiction* pointed everywhere to an epistemological sea change of truly revolutionary proportions. The postwar world, the cultural drive towards what has become known as the Post-modern, can be viewed as opposed responses to the challenge of heterodoxy, a root disagreement reducible to the distinction between the adjective *the* and *a*: Is reality single and knowable? Is truth therefore verifiable and constant; or is it multiple and timebound? And finally, the question as central to interpretation in life as in art, can we hope for *the* meaning of a historical event or poem, or must we make do as best we can with *a* meaning? The implications of this simple distinction seem likely to alter irreversibly the future America her writers will endeavour to write into knowable existence. If the age before 1941 had been an age of the Modern, this was, the critics began to tell us, an age of the Postmodern.

FROM Andreas Huyssen, 'Mapping the Postmodern' in Charles Jencks (ed.) *The Post-modern Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1992)

Against the codified high modernism of the preceding decades, the postmodernism of the 1960s tried to revitalise the heritage of the European avant-garde and to give it an American form along what one could call in short-hand the Duchamp-Cage-Warhol axis. By the 1970s this avantgardist postmodernism of the 1960s had in turn exhausted its potential, even though some of its manifestations continued into the new decade.

What was new in the 1970s was, on the one hand, the emergence of a culture of eclecticism, a largely affirmative postmodernism which had abandoned any claim to critique, transgression or negation; and on the other hand, an alternative postmodernism in which resistance, avantgardist terms, terms which match the political developments in contemporary culture more effectively than the older theories of modernism.

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Roughly since the mid 1950s literature and the arts witnessed a rebellion of a new generation of artists such as Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Kerouac, Ginsberg and the Beats, Burroughs and Barthelme against the dominance of abstract expressionism, serial music and classical literary modernism.

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The crisis of modernism is more than just a crisis of those trends within it which tie it to the ideology of modernisation. In the age of late capitalism, it is also a new crisis of art's relationship to society. At their most emphatic, modernism and avantgardism attributed to art a privileged status in the processes of social change. Even the aestheticist withdrawal from the concern of social change is still bound to it by virtue of its denial of that status quo and the construction of an artificial paradise of exquisite beauty. When social change seemed beyond grasp or took an undesired turn, art was still privileged as the only authentic voice of critique and protest, even when it seemed to withdraw into itself. The classical accounts of high modernism attest to that fact. To admit that these were heroic illusions – perhaps even necessary illusions in art's struggle to survive in dignity in a capitalist society – is not to deny the importance of art in social life.

But modernism's running feud with mass society and mass culture as well as the avantgarde's attack on high art as a support system of cultural hegemony always took place on the pedestal of high art itself.

FROM Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in Hal Foster (ed.) *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985)

But now we need to introduce a new piece into this puzzle, which may help explain why classical modernism is a thing of the past and why postmodernism should have taken its place. This new component is what is generally called the "death of the subject" or, to say it in more conventional language, the end of individualism as such. The great modernisms, were, as we have said, predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your finger print, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style.

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Today, in the age of corporate capitalism, of the so-called organization man, of bureaucracies and business as well as in the state, of demographic explosion – today, that older bourgeois individual subject no longer exists.

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If the experience and the ideology of the unique self, an experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing.

What is clear is merely that the older models – Picasso, Proust, T. S. Eliot - do not work any more (or are positively harmful), since nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer. And this is perhaps not merely a "psychological" matter: we also have to take into account the immense weight of seventy or eighty years of classical modernism itself. There is another sense in which the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds – they have already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already. So the weight of the whole modernist aesthetic tradition – now dead- also "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living," as Marx said in another context.

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If then we suddenly return to the present day, we can measure the immensity of the cultural changes that have taken place. Not only are Joyce and Picasso no longer weird and repulsive, they have become classics and now look rather realistic to us. Meanwhile there is very little in either the form or the content of contemporary art that contemporary society finds intolerable and scandalous.

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The two features of postmodernism on which I have dwelt here – the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents- are both extraordinarily consonant with this process. My own conclusion here must take the form of a question about the critical value of the newer art. There is some agreement that the older modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like. Can anything of the sort be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment? We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces –reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open.