

What is Postmodernism? Fashion in Postmodernism



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INTRODUCTION

What is Postmodernism?

“Postmodernism is a term describing a wide -ranging change in thinking beginnings in the early 20th century. Although a difficult term to pin down, ‘postmodernism’ generally refers to the criticism of absolute truths or identities and ‘grand narratives’. Perhaps the best way to think about postmodernism is to look at modernism, to which postmodernism is generally characterized as either reacting to or emerging from. Postmodernism has had large implications on philosophy, art, critical theory, architecture, literature, history, culture and media. The adjective postmodern (in slang abbreviated to pomo) can refer to aspects of either postmodernism or postmodernity.” (Definition from online Wikipedia)

Postmodernism is a very difficult term to explain in one precise sentence. But a simple explanation would be that its central message is that we have to abandon any attempt to arrive at a true understanding of the world.

In sociology or history, the term postmodernism means the idea that any aspects or account of human behaviour, or any social event is possible, and each aspect is not less valid than others.

In literature or film, postmodernism is seeing as a rejection of any link between the characters and the material social world. Moreover, these characters are seeing in the series of different images, which are not linked by the overall pattern.

Postmodernists do not see a clear line between fact and fiction. They suggest that the relationship between words and things does not exist.

This idea could be supported with the quote by Michel Foucault: "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to go so far as to say that fiction is beyond the truth. It seems to me that it is possible to make fiction work inside of truth." (Fall 1999 Cyberseminar in Objectivist Studies: "The Continental Origins of Postmodernism", <http://www.objectivistcenter.org/>).



Michael Foucault

There have been a number of people, arguing that postmodernism leads to Nihilism (making most of philosophical and historical allegations not important, even before they are said). Lately, everyone has been talking about postmodernism. Many sociologists see this phenomenon as a rise in education. They support the idea that postmodernism is seen as a rescuer from rationality, logocentrism and Eurocentrism (Eurocentrism is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing emphasis on European (and, generally, Western) concerns, culture and values at the expense of those of other cultures. It is not to be confused with Europatriotism. Eurocentrism is an instance of ethnocentrism, perhaps especially relevant because of its alignment with current and past real power structures in the world. Eurocentrism often involved claiming cultures that were not white or European as being such, or denying their existence at all.)(Wikipedia online).

However, there are few critiques to these ideas that see these ideas as an ungrateful enfant of the Western intellectual tradition.

To support this view, here is a quote from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche 1891: "What urges you on and arouses you ardour, you wisest of men, do you call it 'will to truth'? Will to the conceivable of all being: that is what I call your will! You first want to make all being conceivable: for, with a healthy mistrust, you doubt whether it is in fact conceivable. But it must bend and accommodate itself to you! Thus will your will have it. It must become smooth and subject to the mind as the mind's mirror and reflection. That is your entire will, you wisest men, it is a will to power; and that is so even when you talk of good and evil and of the assessment of values. You want to create the world before which you can kneel: this is your ultimate hope and intoxication." (Nietzsche, F 1969: 73).

ANALYSIS & EVALUATION

Many can say that postmodern culture denies the borders between high and low forms of art, as well as the distinction between genres, and they also suggest that postmodern art supports "reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject."

Postmodernists have always been concerned about the organisation of knowledge. Compared to modern culture, knowledge was seen same as a science but opposite to narrative. Sociologists at that time suggested that science was a good knowledge, but narrative – bad and primitive, therefore often associated with children, women and mental people.

However, in postmodern culture, knowledge is seen as a function – the knowledge is for you to use, not just to know. Madan Sarup (1930 – 1993) supports this view, suggesting that educational agenda puts an emphasis on the skills and training rather than giving a value to humanist ideal of education system.

In postmodern societies, knowledge is being looked at very differently than in modern. The rise of education these days is seeing as a result of developing the electronic computer technologies and communication technologies in the world. And from that point of view, many could argue that postmodernism is best described by the emergence of computer technology, which started in the 60s, that is also seeing as a dominant force in all aspects of social life.

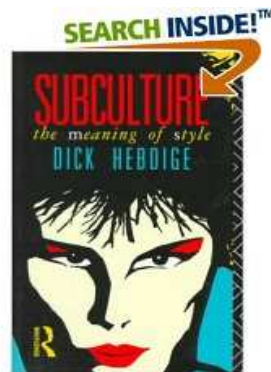
In postmodern world, knowledge could be ceased as anything that cannot be recognized and not disguisable. In contrast with modern societies, where the opposite of 'knowledge' would be 'ignorance', in postmodern – the opposite would be 'noise', which means that anything that is not recognized as knowledge is noise.

Lyotard suggests that what is important in postmodern culture is that who is deciding what knowledge is and what is noise. The answers to these questions don't take into account the modern qualifications. Rather, Lyotard says, that follows the paradigm of a language game .

However, on another level, postmodern societies are seen as giving the alternatives to joining the global culture of consumption, and here, knowledge is offered not by the any individual's control but by the forces beyond that. And these alternatives emphasise the ideas that any action, even limited or partial, are seemed to be effective. "By discarding "grand narratives" (like the liberation of the entire working class) and focusing on specific local goals (such as improved day care centers for working mothers in your own community), postmodernist politics offers a way to theorize local situations as fluid and unpredictable, though influenced by global trends. Hence the motto for postmodern politics might well be "think globally, act locally"--and don't worry about any grand scheme or master plan ."(<http://www.dilibrary.net> An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism)

Postmodern Fashion

The emphasis on the dress code and style is seen as the most distinctive features of visual culture in the postmodern societies. The wide range of quality fabrics, trims, colours, silhouettes, etc reflect the openness and fragmentation in the history of post-Enlightenment Western clothing conferences. And, to mention the fashion system, where articulated rules and codes, which are opposite to innovation, revolt and pluralization take place. Within the field of cultural studies these and related propositions are illustrated most memorably in Dick Hebdige's classic book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, which charts the differing styles during the 1960s and 70s of teddy boys, mods, skinheads, Rastas, and especially punks in relation to the historical conjuncture of mainstream culture.



Subculture: The Meaning of Style

In postmodern societies, youngsters usually associate and link their styles with music, dance and pop culture, which sometimes can create shocking ensembles that are seen against the mainstream order; these styles usually send a message of a rejection and rebelliousness. Innovation in fashion is less a matter of creativity out of nothing than of mutation and pastiche.

Punk fashion, with its torn tee shirts, orange hair, safety pin piercing, necklaces of toilet chains, and mask-like make-up, effectively demonstrates not only the simultaneous systematicity and disorganization of late twentieth-century dress-codes, but also the heteroglot visual culture characteristics of postmodern social regimes.

Dress code is usually associated with cultural capital, but in a way, it serves a political design. Fashion industry, in contrast with all major industries growing during postmodern times, is most linked with the dynamics of late capitalist political economy, class envy, unionization, advertising, and mass media as well as a range of other paradoxical tendencies of postmodern societies.

Aesthetic criteria play an essential part in clothing design and evaluation. However, much they shift, there are always finely calibrated touchstones, standards, and ideals for beauty. Whether you are at court or on the street, in the marketplace or at the ball, in the past or present, dress exhibits both theatrical and performative dimensions.

Fashion is typically staged in motion. Moreover, fashion's substances, particularly fabric, texture, design, color, and drape, highlight its materiality, which, significantly, opens onto long, intertwined histories of costuming and textile crafting. Every item of dress, no matter how humble, dignified, frivolous, or vanguard, occupies space in fashion archives and the history of aesthetics.

Forming Identities

In our current societies, where everyone is looking and is being looked at, a personal style is always being coded and decoded in the processes of social interaction and judgments. In the highly visual world of postmodern times, subjectivity unfolds in a play of images. Fashion is now all about our identity, reflecting our social class, race, culture, and different subcultures that we may belong to, and its significance is less restricted to the upper classes in metropolitan centers.

By way of expanding market and media widespread, western fashion is now taking the initiative in dissemination of the postmodern phenomena of widespread reinscriptions and shocking ensembles. At the same time, in the centers the long-standing modern paradigm of 'dull clothed males and decked females' has evolved an unstable electric post-modern codes of dress.

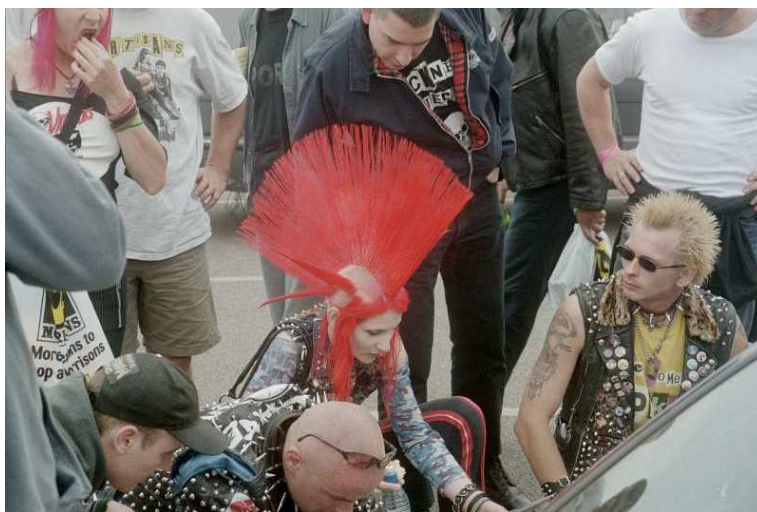
At the same time vanguard fashion runways, music videos, and certain urban subcultures feature increasingly well-publicized gender bending, camp, masquerade, varieties of cross dressing, and collapsed high/low dress distinctions, proliferating anti-fashion genres and pastiche styles.

Vivienne Westwood. Postmodern designer.

Vivienne Westwood was born Vivienne Isabel Swire in Glossop, Derbyshire, in 1941 and has come to be known as one of the most influential British designers of the twentieth century. While she is latterly credited with introducing “underwear as outerwear”, reviving the corset, and inventing the “mini-crini”, her earliest and most formative association is with the subcultural fashion and youth movement, in the postmodern times, known as punk.

“Punk is a contemporary subculture closely associated with punk rock. The punk subculture has a shared history, culture, lifestyle and community. Since emerging in the United Kingdom and the United States in the mid -1970s, punk has spread around the globe and undergone a series of tumultuous developments.

Punk culture is based around a shared set of styles distinct from those of popular culture and other subcultures. Punk has its own styles of music, ideology, fashion, visual art, dance, literature and film. An otherwise disparate assortment of mostly young people, members of the subculture, or punks, express these cultural elements in the context of punk communities, or punk scenes.” (Definition from online Wikipedia)



Punk Culture

Vivienne Westwood is often cited as punk's creator, but the complex history of punk is also found in England's depressed economic and socio-political conditions of the mid-1970s.

Punk is seen as a youth recreation (or better to say rebellion) against older generations, though to be oppressive and outdated, as a product of the newly recognized and influential youth pop culture. Being such a creative designer, Westwood contributed to an aesthetic that brings subcultural styles/dress codes to the fashion forefront.

Westwood, a former school teacher, was the seamstress in the Sex shop partnership with McLaren and made manifest their combined punk vision through her creations. Westwood designed both her and McLaren's clothing before they opened their first store, Let It Rock, in 1971. Let It Rock catered to the Teddy Boy subculture, which was a 1950s revival look. In 1972, they renamed the store Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die, and changed the focus to emphasize the emergence of the Marlon Brando-influenced rocker/biker style that was popular at the time.

Punk was both a product and a victim of late capitalism. As the most quickly digested of all previous youth subcultures, it came to fruition and fell victim to mass marketing in less than three years. Since then, punk has never entirely gone out of style. Soon after the Sex Pistols disbanded in 1978, one could see punk everywhere in London, the US, and elsewhere. One still sees flamboyant teenagers wearing bondage trousers and studded leather motorcycle jackets on streets such as St. Marks Place in NYC, where these garments are still sold in quantity. Punk has even taken more than one turn at being an inspiration to haute couture. In the 21st Century, punk and hip-hop, another subcultural style born of strife, have been fused together into what has become the standard look for contemporary youth.

SUMMARY

So what is postmodernism? This is, once again, a very difficult question, and there is not a one answer to it, because in many ways this term is a misnomer. Many postmodern philosophers and sociologists still refuse to accept this label. And even if there are a small number of postmodernists who accept it, there is a huge diversity in their view and approaches.

And as to postmodern fashion, fashion is more than a matter of personal attitude, posturing, clothing design and haute couture. It impacts collectivities both First and Third World, urbanized and rusticated, disorganized and not. It is part of the contemporary aestheticization of everyday life.

The images circulating through fashion media numbingly repeat beautiful but destructive stereotypes, norms, ideas and views, producing alienated identification, anxiety, contradiction and envy. The boundaries between the high-art of haute couture and the low-art of the high street, a test of postmodernity in other mediums, have been broken down. You can dress like your mum, your daughter or your boyfriend all at the same time, and it would be accepted as normal.

So, our fashion culture has been condemned to eternal postmodernism in endless season of rehash and replication. It is a license to do and wear whatever you want – which is a rare freedom.

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