

Postmodernism

The following is an abridged version of a paper given by Dr. Charlotte de Mille.

The best place for us to begin to think about the postmodern is Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). First, Postmodernism recognises 'the failure of the universal', and attempts to cover the scar of that failure with parody, irony and quotation. Following the holocaust, Postmodernism no longer believes in the idea of progress, however Lyotard is clear that economic and political liberalism and innovations in technology and science are as guilty as any totalitarian system of government. Third, Lyotard's Postmodernism is *ethical*. His aspiration is that in bringing to light the inadequacies of society, we may actively find ways to overcome them. Contemporary art offers one such voice in this critique, since, in Julian Stallabrass's words, it 'consistently makes a virtue of all that disrupts conventional categories, shatters fixed notions of identity and throws interpretation into deep, irresolvable ambiguity'.¹

However, Lyotard posits *two* postmodernisms, what is, and what ought to be. What is, he disparagingly described as follows:

*...one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats MacDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games. ... Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the 'anything goes' and the epoch is one of slackening.*²

We are stuck in the stasis of an unthinking, conformist society, a banal material culture of excess. What Lyotard wants resides in the last traces of the avant-garde, in experimental writing, philosophical reflection, and abstract painting. 'The postmodernism that should exist is an extreme avant-garde refusal of comfort, insistence on difference, and focus on the extra-rational [and] unrepresentable.'³ His ideal focuses on difference and questions the extent of representation. And this is why, in *The Inhuman, Reflections on Time*, Lyotard devotes a chapter to Barnett Newman an artist equally championed by that bastion of Modernism, Clement Greenberg.

¹ Julian Stallabrass, BA 2 Frameworks Lecture, 'Lyotard', 2007.

² *PMC*, p. 76.

³ Julian Stallabrass, in BA2 lecture, *ibid*.

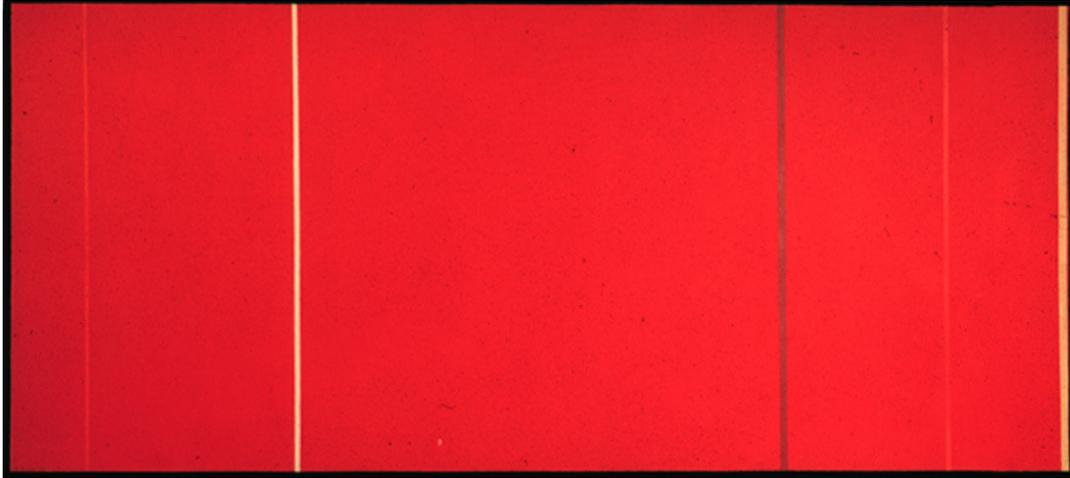


Fig 1. Barnett Newman *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*

Lyotard claims that at the heart of Newman's work lies the question *Is it happening?* – the 'it' being an un-nameable matter or event, and the question filled with anxiety because it is possible that nothing is happening, perhaps there is only a void. When *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* was first exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, Newman tacked a notice to the wall which read, 'There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.' The idea being that to be immersed in the enormous scale, something that up close is larger than our perception, gives a more forceful experience of the work. Lyotard suggests that just as in music the same note has a different timbre according to the instrument on which it is played, the same colour will be seen differently in different media – oil for example, or watercolour.⁴

Consider now Greenberg's opening sentence to 'An Introduction to an Exhibition of Barnett Newman' (1958), where he makes a claim for Newman as 'the splendour of American painting'. He goes on: 'there is no program, no polemic in these paintings. They do not intend to make a point'. The truth of art lies for him, as for any genuinely ambitious artist, somewhat beyond what he *knows* he can do.' So Lyotard: 'the painting *is*... It announces nothing; it is in itself the annunciation... Newman is not representing a non-representable annunciation; he allows it to present itself.'⁵ What this brief comparison should alert you to is something that is no doubt clear already: that there is a substantial grey area between Modernism and Postmodernism.

But when the art world first started to respond to mass culture, it was quite clearly on – and in – the terms of art – and it was with precisely the witty and ironic tone which we have been led to expect. Take for instance Jasper Johns' *Flag* (figure 2).

⁴ *Inhuman*, p. 140.

⁵ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 78–79.



Figure 2. Jasper Johns, *Flag*

As one contemporary critic questioned, 'Is it a flag or a painting?'. Johns' interest in the flag was, as he acknowledged, because he 'didn't have to design it' – by concentrating on things that 'the mind already knows' he was able to open up different subjects. And in the case of the *Flag*, this is explored by the juxtaposition of the associations of what is an iconic image, and the detail one can read in it when we get up close. Johns' technique used newspaper soaked in colour, which allows the print to be red in the white stripes. The time of this flag's making was at the start of the Cold War and in the middle of the McCarthy era which saw aggressive attacks and surveillance of many citizens, often mistakenly suspected of communist affiliation which was seen as anti-American.

Johns' images of the American Flag were however to enter into a more specific art network through the work of Robert Rauschenberg and later, Elaine Sturtevant. In *Short Circuit (Combine Painting)*, 1955 (figure 3), Rauschenberg incorporated a miniature Johns flag into his newly invented 'combine' – meaning a multi-media assemblage using three-dimensional objects on what began as a two-dimensional canvas. In this case, Rauschenberg's intention was to stage a protest against a change in the exhibiting rules of the annual Stable Gallery show in 1955, which prevented exhibitors from recommending artist colleagues for subsequent years. Consequently, Rauschenberg smuggled the Johns flag and a work by his ex-wife Susan Weil, (seen on the right) into his own exhibit for that year. Rauschenberg's work criticises gallery policy, subverting their authority, whilst finding a way to promote new modes of producing art counter to the dominant Abstract Expressionism. Instead of the 'metaphysical' we have the antithesis: ephemeral, familiar, and consumer led, the components in Rauschenberg's combine are somehow domesticated. In a twist that is congruent with Rauschenberg's own appropriation of mass culture into new modes of reference, the Johns flag was allegedly stolen out of the combine in 1965 – so what you see in figure 4, is in fact NOT a Johns original, but a replacement which Johns asked Sturtevant to make. Sturtevant's entire oeuvre consists of replicas of other artists' works, which by 1965 had already included other flags by Johns: so to that extent, the Johns flag reads doubly: as the 'lost' Johns original, and as an original Sturtevant – a circle of reference that speaks well to the interests of these neo-dada artists. The work has itself been 'short-circuited'. It is so neat I have to avoid any suggestion that it might have been intentional.



Figure 3. *Short Circuit (Combine Painting)*

Of course this kind of conceptual art had a history, from the irreverent doctoring at the hands of Marcel Duchamp and his 'readymade' defacement of a postcard of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, alongside one of Andy Warhol's silkscreen prints using a similar postcard with screen-print overlay, *Mona Lisa*, 1963, on the occasion of the loan of Leonardo da Vinci's work to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These works demand that we reconsider our expectations with regards to authenticity, making, and craft. Just what do we expect of art, and how highly do we prize the concept of originality? Moreover, what does it mean to speak of an original, in the face of technologies for mass-printing, now exploited by the artist? What are the icons of modern culture, and what do they tell us of our priorities? Barbara Kruger's work from the 1980s, such as the 1981 piece, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits The Side Of My Face)* or 1987 *I shop therefore I am* (figure 4) subvert billboard advertising to comment on consumerism, celebrity culture, and power from a feminist perspective. But with appropriate postmodern irony, she releases her images (under careful management) for the very consumerist society that she questions: her work has been translated onto mugs, tee-shirts, umbrellas, bags. After all, is this not the most fruitful means of communicating the politically and ethically conscious postmodern?



Figure 4.

These pieces return us to Lyotard, and to some of the concepts with which I began. Lyotard made his own stringent comments on what he described as the

...staging, spectacularisation, mediatisation, simulation, hegemony of artefacts, generalised mimesis, hedonism, narcissism, self-referentialism, auto-affection, auto-construction and others.

The postmodern is a disillusioned version of the modern, unafraid of the abyss, and too overly anaesthetised to the disasters of modern life. Writing of the modern media-centric city he said:

The immense zone rustles with billions of padded messages. Even its violence, wars, revolts, riots, ecological disasters, famines, genocides, murders are broadcast as spectacles, along with the following notice: you see, this is not good, it requires new regulations, other forms of community that must be invented, this will pass. Despair is thus taken as a disorder to correct, never as the sign of an irremediable lack.⁶

According to Lyotard, we are not even clearly aware of what is missing, what *could* be. And yet, for all the incongruity of postmodern images – the over-riding sense of a mismatch between matter and form – what you will have realised is that each work is concerned with representation: with showing something tangible, in contrast to the high ideals for abstraction. To up-date us from Lyotard's texts of 1979–86, I could offer the following suggestion. Arguably we might consider ourselves in a second-wave stage of Postmodernism, or even, as has been coined in philosophy to account for shifts in emphasis within tradition, a post-continental-philosophy. Amid doubt and irony, we now have passionate political and religious conviction; the underground cultural networks have erupted to the surface of instantaneous communication on a global scale; from endless discourse around the object, we have a return to the object itself – a renewed interest in the 'thing itself', understood according to a philosophy of immanence.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has asked

why so many critics, so many writers, so many philosophers take such satisfaction in professing that the experience of a work of art is ineffable, that it escapes by definition all rational understanding; why are they so eager to concede without a struggle the defeat of knowledge; and where does their irrepressible need to belittle rational understanding come from, this rage to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art, or, to use a more suitable word, its transcendence.⁷

It seems we absolutely want art to be beyond our everyday experience; and if it is merely clever, it misses the point. Contemporary life might proclaim that with science and technology we no longer seek the unknown, but our relation to works of art still tells a different story. We are not so invincible as we should like to think.

⁶ L, *Fables*, p. 31.

⁷ Bourdieu, *Rules*, p. xiv.

I have been suggesting that Postmodernism is as much a point of view, a way of reading a work as it is an artistic style. Many will argue with me for that, but as responses to the V&A show with which I began made clear, there was a general consensus that we are still too close to the 'postmodern era' to be able to judge it objectively as a moment in history. I would like to end then with a caution from Raymond Williams. Williams was highly critical of the new post-modern, although as Tony Pinkey made clear in his introduction to *The Politics of Modernism*, 'the value of the post-modernist popularist impulse at least could not readily be rejected; indeed it is... at the heart of the very project of the "cultural studies" which Williams in the early sixties invented.'⁸ Williams did sketch out what are now many of the premises of Post-modernism, but he said, 'If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose, an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.'⁹

⁸ Pinkey in Williams, 23.

⁹ Williams, *When was Modernism*, 35