

# Postmodernism and the Postmodern Novel

Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin  
1995

Few terms have been subject to such intense debates as "postmodernism". Though its indiscriminate use has all but exhausted the word of any kind of precise meaning, one can distinguish three major usages : 1) to refer to the non-realist and non-traditional literature and art of the post-World War Two period; 2) to refer to literature and art which takes certain modernist characteristics to an extreme stage, a view propounded in John Barth's *The Literature of Exhaustion*; and 3) to refer to a more general human condition in the "late-capitalist" world of the post 1950s, a period marked by the end of what Jean-François Lyotard calls the grand "meta-narratives" of western culture. The myths by which we once legitimized knowledge and practice -- Christianity, Science, Democracy, Communism, Progress, no longer have the unquestioning support necessary to sustain the projects which were undertaken in their name, resulting in a radical decentring of our cultural sphere. It is not simply that the postmodernism does not believe in "truth" so much that it understands truth and meaning as historically constructed and thus seeks to expose the mechanisms by which this production is hidden and "naturalized".

Among the modernist devices which postmodernism pushes to a new extreme are : the rejection of mimetic representation in favour of a self-referential "playing" with the forms, conventions and icons of "high art" and literature; the rejection of the cult of originality in recognition of the inevitable loss of origin in the age of mass production; the rejection of plot and character as meaningful artistic conventions; and the rejection of meaning itself as delusory.

However, where modernism thought of itself as a last ditch attempt to shore up, like Eliot's Fisher King, the ruins of western culture, postmodernists often gleefully accept its demise and plunder its remains for their artistic materials. Andy Warhol's multiple images of Marilyn Monroe and Kathy Acker's re-writing of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* are representative of the postmodernist trend toward to *bricolage*, the use of the bits and pieces of older artifacts to produce a new, if not "original", work of art, a work which blurs the traditional distinctions between the old and the new even as it blurs those between high and low art.

Postmodernism in literature is usually associated with (among others) Acker, Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino and John Ashberry. Their literary strategies widely differ, but each shows a self-reflexive interest in the processes of narrative itself and the means by which it constructs both text and reader. In Barth's short story, *Lost in the Funhouse*, for example, the narrator constantly breaks the illusion of realism to make reference to the conventional codes of literature which he is currently employing :

"En route to Ocean City he sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G\_\_\_\_, age fourteen, a pretty girl and exquisite young lady who lived not far from them on B\_\_\_\_ Street [...] Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means." (69)

Though postmodernism is considered something of a spent force in certain circles (most of its major literary

figures, Pynchon, Barth, Bartheleme, etc., produced their most vigorous work in the late sixties and seventies), its legacy is perhaps the most dominant context for the formal experimentation which characterizes hypertext fiction. If postmodernism is condemned for having given up the world of social and political engagement for the solipsistic pleasures of word play, what will be said of a fiction that entices its readers into the ethereal void of the electronic word ? Does Borges's fable of the library which encompasses the whole world not have its uncanny realization in William Gibson's cyberspace, or Ted Nelson's Xanadu project ? Bartheleme's episodic short stories and Ballard's "condensed novels" have paved the way for the fiction of nodes and links, but it remains to be seen whether its authors can yet turn the detritus of our collapsing "meta-narratives" into the stuff of a new mode of representation.