

© Steven Miles 2001
First published 2001
Reprinted 2002, 2004, 2006

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.



SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
PO Box 4109
New Delhi - 100 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 6155 0
ISBN 0 7619 6156 9 (pbk)
ISBN 13- 978 0 7619 6155 0 (hbk)
ISBN 13- 978 0 7619 6156 7 (pbk)

Typeset by Mayhew Typesetting, Rhayader, Powys
Printed and bound by Athenaeum Press Ltd., Gateshead, Tyne & Wear

A POST-MODERN 'SOCIETY'?

Many years ago I attended a course on the subject of 'postmodernity' which was taught by one of the leading and most respected contributors to the field of contemporary social theory. The end result of this particular course was that by its conclusion I felt I knew less about the subject matter concerned than I had done to begin with! This was less the fault of that particular lecturer and more a testament to the problematic and quite often mystifying nature of debates which stubbornly continue to surround post-modernity. The core of the problem, as Kellner (1990) points out, is that post-modern theory is not unified in any real sense, but constitutes a sort of 'unholy' marriage which joins together a variety of theories and positions (see also Ritzer, 1992). In this chapter I want to suggest that post-modernity represents one of the most important foci of debate in contemporary social theory, but that, in addition, simply by being so influential, it actively, and in some senses usefully, undermines the foundations of social theory in general. In short, post-modernity problematizes the role of the social theorist in a changing world, and, as such, provides a fascinating means of addressing the changing role of the social world and the social theorist at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Post-modernity has given social theory a much needed injection of imagination, whilst precipitating an extensive and often overwhelming level of debate. This level of debate is signified by the very fact that I prefer to refer to post-modernity rather than postmodernity. The hyphen hints at the disputed nature of the term itself (see also Rosenau, 1992). As such, it raises some genuine doubts as to whether or not social theory can actually continue to serve any real purpose at all, and, perhaps more importantly, whether or not social theorists and social scientists in general can actually claim to be studying any such thing as the 'real' world. Alternatively, it could be argued that the recent focus on post-modernity actually represents an extremely damaging trend for social theory. You might even go as far as to say that it amounts to a theoretical bandwagon upon which social theorists have jumped. Unfortunately, many of them have fallen off the other side. Defenders of post-modernism might well argue that the informal vitriol and the strength of feeling of those concerned with post-modernism simply reflect an inability or unwillingness to accept the challenges of the new world. From this point of

understand it. Either way, if you dismiss post-modernism entirely you are simply adding further fuel to the post-modern fire.

This chapter will attempt to answer the following question: do debates concerned with post-modernity amount to little more than a theoretical blind alley, or do they have a significant contribution to make to our understanding of the social world at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Before we answer this question, there cannot be any doubt that at least at one level the trends we associate with post-modernism pervade our everyday lives. We only have to switch on our television sets to hear about the influence of post-modern art, film, philosophy and literature. In many ways we *live* the post-modern. Like other aspects of social life discussed elsewhere in this book, we therefore take it for granted. It is worth noting in this context that in many ways social theorists are more concerned with theorising about post-modernity than they are with post-modernism; that is, with the underlying aspects and characteristics of social change which conspire to create post-modernism in all its various guises. Post-modernism and post-modernity remain highly contested terms, and this is partly their attraction. The debates they engender are never resolved. As Bryman argues in his book *Disney and His Worlds* (1995), 'summarizing this genre is no easy matter and can be compared to trying to grab hold of jelly with a clamp – it changes shape and consistency and then fragments' (p. 161). Post-modernism is a highly influential intellectual movement, and an abstract and disconcerting movement at that, but it also actively impinges upon our everyday lives. By discussing how this might be the case, it might be possible to develop a deeper understanding of whether or not we do actually live in a post-modern world and whether or not that world is 'real'.

An epochal shift?

The debate over post-modernity is concerned with the nature of social change and the extent of that change. It therefore reflects an ongoing preoccupation of social theorists, who are concerned with explaining or at least describing social changes that appear to exert influence on how we as individuals conduct our everyday lives in individual settings. As I have already said, the range of approaches that broadly fit under the umbrella of post-modernism is absolutely enormous. In order, therefore, to try to comprehend the essence of the debates concerning post-modernism, I will attempt to simplify things at this stage by focusing on what is perhaps the core matter for dispute:

thirty to forty years actually constitute an epochal shift. In other words, do we live in an entirely 'new' society, or is that society simply an extension of modernity?

Perhaps what characterized or characterizes modernity above all is its quest for human freedom and autonomy. Debates over post-modernity suggest that the problem with modernity was that it could never fulfil its promise. Ultimately, modernity was undone by the requirements of instrumental reason and the suggestion that the ends and the needs of the social system in general were more important than the needs of those human beings propping up that system. In effect, progress seemed to create more problems for human beings than it actually solved. Alienation, anomie and bureaucracy were all aspects of modern life that appeared actively to go against what it means to be a human being. The system controlled people. Far from liberating them, it created a world in which they had very little say. This set of circumstances could not be maintained indefinitely, and post-modernity is arguably the end result or reaction to this process. It amounts to a period of uncertainty and dislocation in which the secure foundations and stabilities of modern life have been radically undermined. The question is, however, how far does such dislocation amount to a whole new way of life? In order to address this question I want to consider the contribution of two key theorists of the post-modern, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, who have been chosen not necessarily because they are the most important theorists of the post-modern, but because their work highlights some of the concerns of the broader debate. Perhaps the main thing to take from this brief discussion is that although broadly speaking the theorists concerned are talking about the same trends, they do so from somewhat different perspectives and disagree as to how far these trends constitute a radical break with modernity.

Fredric Jameson

Fredric Jameson is the author of one of the single most important essays on the question of post-modernism: 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984). As this title suggests, Jameson argues that post-modernism does not constitute a radical shift in the nature of social life at all. Rather the sorts of social changes we experience are simply part of the logical and ongoing cultural development of capitalism. Jameson's work is very refreshing in the sense that he does not discuss post-modernism from an abstract distance, but actively relates it to broader social processes. For Jameson, to

misleading and underestimates the continuities that characterize capitalism in general. Borrowing from the work of Ernest Mandel (1978), Jameson therefore identifies three periods in the development of capitalism:

- (a) market capitalism, whereby markets were highly integrated and the character of capitalism was very much dependent upon the confines of the nation-state;
- (b) imperial/monopoly capitalism, which saw capitalism extending its markets, notably through the colonies, which provided new opportunities for expansion;
- (c) multinational or consumer capitalism, which saw the increasingly sophisticated tentacles of capitalism exploring new areas and exploiting individual forms of acquisitiveness to the benefit of the market on a global scale.

Jameson is keen to point out, therefore, that post-modernism is very much bound up with the global progression of capitalism and the expansion of a global culture which this incorporates. These processes have resulted in the individual being taken out of his or her immediate locality in some form, to be engulfed by a global culture. Although this amounts to an apparently significant change in the nature of social life, it should not be assumed that it constitutes an epochal shift. The factors underlying such changes are the same factors that have been underlying social change for over a century. But what is different is *how* capitalism operates. It has become more and more sophisticated and subtle in nature, and, as such, we tend to *feel* we are experiencing an epochal shift: 'What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation' (Jameson, 1984, p. 56).

For Jameson, post-modernism is a hopelessly commercial culture. And perhaps the most significant point he makes in this respect is that culture is no longer ideological. Its role is not to disguise economic activity. It has, in itself, become an economic activity, and in a post-modern world it is perhaps more an important economic activity than any other. Jameson therefore describes a depthless culture of surfaces and pastiche in which the past is used to sustain the present. He sees post-modernism as a 'culture of quotations'. But ironically, and despite this suggestion, he does not criticize the label directly. Rather, he extends Marx's discussion of capitalism as being both constraining and yet potentially liberating at the same time. In this sense his criticism of other post-modern approaches to social

change might well be that they are not sufficiently grounded in the economic conditions that provide the foundations for such change.

This is a point equally well made by another Marxist commentator, David Harvey (1989), who argues that there are serious weaknesses with a post-modern perspective. In particular, post-modernists neglect the material conditions in which contemporary societies operate. More seriously, Harvey criticizes post-modernists for simply describing the problems inherent in a post-modern world rather than actually doing something about them. He is concerned with the apathetic tendencies of post-modernism: 'The rhetoric of postmodernism is dangerous for it avoids confronting the realities of political economy and the circumstances of global power' (p. 117). From this point of view, what postmodernism doesn't do yet should do is to confront the political and economic conditions in which the depthless culture Jameson (1984) describes has emerged.

Jean Baudrillard

Jean Baudrillard (1983) is often described as the 'high priest' of post-modernism, and there is no doubt that his controversial and at times somewhat perplexing work has played an influential role in the construction of a post-modern agenda. As Ritzer (1992) notes, Jean Baudrillard's work has had a profound impact on post-modern social theory despite the fact that he himself has expressed dissatisfaction with the label 'post-modern'. Indeed, there is an argument voiced both by Ritzer and by Gane (1991) that Baudrillard is actually *against* post-modernism. From this point of view it is actually very difficult to pigeon-hole Baudrillard. But the same could equally be said of post-modernists in general. The important thing is that Baudrillard's work continues to be among the most influential contributions to the debates in question.

The key which unlocks Baudrillard's work is the suggestion that we have come to a point in history when the social has ended. The social has imploded into the mass to the extent that we can no longer usefully use the concept at all. Baudrillard therefore describes a world dominated by the image, and in particular those images generated by the mass media. These images are so dominant that we can no longer genuinely identify anything that can be described as 'real':

... our world has become truly infinite, or rather exponential by means of images. It is caught up in a mad pursuit of images, and an even greater fascination which is only accentuated by video and digital images. We have thus come to the paradox that these images describe the equal impossibility of the real and the imaginary. ... In the absence of rules of the game, things

become caught up in their own game; images become more real than real; cinema itself becomes more cinema than cinema, in a kind of vertigo in which it does no more than resemble itself and escape in its own logic, in the very perfection of its own model. (Baudrillard, 1993, pp. 194–5)

In the post-modern world, if that's what you want to call it, everyday experience is radically different from what it may have been in the past. The essence of this change lies in the collapse of meaning and reality and the dominance of the image or signifier. These images therefore become more real than reality. This is what Baudrillard calls 'hyper-simulation'. Historical boundaries are blurred by the constant borrowing and rehashing of cultural artefacts. The mixture of historical contexts creates a heady cocktail that seems to be contemporary, but is simply about reproducing the past in 'new' ways.

Reality is actively defined by the mass media. As such, Baudrillard (1995) (in)famously claimed that the Gulf War never actually happened, but was a product of a mass media age. In discussing this proposition, Dunn (1998) uses the example of mass-mediated sporting events. The top American stadia will now almost always deploy video technology so that important incidents are repeated instantaneously, whilst advertisements are played even when the action is actually taking place in the stadium. The same can be said of major rock concerts, which have become orgies of imagery in which the basic talents of the actual performers are dwarfed by the screens and videos that surround them. Indeed, 'While in such examples the media do not literally replace reality, they are endowed by spectators with a power to verify and sanction it and a visual pleasure that makes reality subservient to its representation' (Dunn, 1998, p. 101). The process of commodification is central to everything Baudrillard describes. Along with technological advance, commodification has created a world of superficiality and simulation. To give another example of the dominance of the image. The Nike Swoosh, a sign recognizable on a global scale, constructs a particular image and vision of what the world is all about. But at the same time it hides the reality that lies behind that image, such as the thousands of workers employed as cheap labour to bring Nike goods to the marketplace. The social has, in effect, been taken out of social life. The meanings lying behind the commodified culture we consume become camouflaged by the surfaces that constrain those meanings. Because such images dominate how we perceive our social world (if we can indeed describe it as such), that world becomes a mere mass, and our humanity is based on nothing more than our ability to consume spectacular simulations of reality. The epochal nature of social change is such that we can no longer even identify any such thing as the social. In short, as McGuigan (1999)

forms of sociality and representation. And herein, arguably, lies Baudrillard's greatest fault. Authors such as McGuigan (1999) and Kellner (1994) have pointed out that Baudrillard exaggerates any perceived break with the past. Baudrillard's insights are incisive, but cannot be accepted in their entirety. His ironic, playful style is one thing, but style alone is ironically not enough.

Post-modern fragmentation and popular culture

Perhaps the best way to come to terms with the complexity of debates over modernity and post-modernity is to focus, to begin with, on the question of fragmentation. Many theorists argue that social life has become less predictable and more fragmented than it was in the past. The old certainties and securities that left us entirely sure as to our role in the social world have apparently broken down. Contemporary societies therefore feel increasingly directionless in nature. We seem to live in what is more and more of an individualistic world in which class cultures, and in particular working-class culture, are less unified than they have been in the past and in which there are fewer and fewer reference points or sources of stability upon which we can depend. The suggestion here then is that whereas in the past our identities may have been based on our relationship to work, our class position, or our family role, in the contemporary world our social experience is far more tenuous and we are increasingly subject to momentary actions and transitory feelings. The question of fragmentation is taken up especially effectively in the work of Zygmunt Bauman (1995), who argues that modernity is characterized by pilgrims who actively seek predefined goals while post-modernity in contrast is characterized by a diverse range of 'strollers', 'players', 'tourists' and 'vagabonds'. All of these groups are forced to deal with the transient inconsequential uncertainties of everyday life in their own ways. Such fragmentation is very much bound up with the changing nature of consumption (see Lyon, 1994). Through consumption we can be who we want when we want, changing from one minute to the next.

The question that this chapter is concerned with is: how is post-modern fragmentation expressed in the 'real' world? This problem is inherently tricky insofar as some post-modernists may argue there is no such thing as the real world in the first place. There are only versions of that world and individual interpretations of it, rather than any 'real' sense of genuine reality. But before I consider this issue in more depth I want to establish a more accurate picture of what

critically to evaluate post-modern contributions to contemporary social theory. Above all in this context, it is important to remember that post-modernism does not constitute a school of thought in the traditional sense, as you might consider the work of functionalists, Marxists or members of the Frankfurt School perhaps. Post-modernism is a broad umbrella term for commentators on the social world who have a variety of both positive and negative versions of what that world is all about. These versions may be very different and apparently contradictory but they all share a concern with some common themes.

In this context, McRobbie (1994) describes post-modernism as a breath of fresh air: 'It has spread outwards from the realm of art history into political theory and on to the pages of youth culture magazines, record sleeves and the fashion spreads of *Vogue*' (p. 15). McRobbie argues that post-modernism is very much bound up with the massive expansion, in recent decades, of the mass media, which, despite economic ups and downs, has continuously been able to create new markets. The net result of this 'implosion', according to McRobbie, is the dominance of the image:

Images push their way into the fabric of our social lives. They enter into how we look and what we earn, and they are still with us when we worry about bills, housing and bringing up children. They compete for attention through shock tactics, reassurance, sex and mystery, and by inviting viewers to participate in series of visual puzzles. (1994, p. 18)

But McRobbie is also keen to point out that the pastiche and the ransacking and recycling we associate with post-modernism can actually just as easily amount to a vibrant critique as it can an 'inward-looking, second-hand aesthetics' (p. 22). The images we associate with post-modernism can never be unambiguously positive or negative. As far as McRobbie is concerned, it is naïve to talk about the end of the social or the end of meaning. People can actually use the diverse range of the media and its imagery to their own ends.

One author who is particularly useful in illuminating our understanding of the popular cultural expression of post-modernism is Dominic Strinati (1995), who charts the various realms of popular culture in which post-modern fragmentation appears to exist, namely architecture, cinema, television, advertising and pop music.

Post-modern architecture, in contrast to its modern predecessor, which was functional and scientific, is playful, ironic and elaborate. Post-modern buildings are celebratory, not functional. They combine diverse elements of different time periods to create a dramatic surface impression, because surface impression is all. As such, Connor (1997) suggests that architecture represents the clearest place to examine the

categorical shifts are readily defined by architects. The post-modern movement is therefore characterized by hybrid languages of difference and plurality (Connor, 1997, p. 87). But the irony is that, in one sense, the difference we associate with post-modern architecture is itself dehumanizing:

The 'hybrid', 'complex' and 'dual-coded' language of postmodernist architecture ought to testify to a new sense of rootedness or locality, but where hybridization itself becomes universal, regional specificity becomes simply a style which can be transmitted across the globe as rapidly as a photocopy of the latest architectural manifesto. Paradoxically, the sign of the success of the anti-universalist language and style of architectural postmodernism is that one can find it everywhere, from London, to New York, to Tokyo and Delhi. (Connor, 1997, p. 87)

It is true to say also that when commentators talk about the post-modern city what they actually really mean is the expression of post-modern architecture. But there are exceptions. For example, Wynne and O'Connor (1998) argue that consumption is a particularly significant aspect of contemporary city life. Their point is that the commodification of culture is fundamental to an understanding of what constitutes the post-modern city. Cultural production, according to this view, is an increasingly significant aspect of city life. In particular, 'new cultural intermediaries' or producers are increasingly promoting cultural consumption as a key focus of city life. Cities like Leeds, keen to promote itself as a 24-hour city; Manchester, with its thriving gay village; and Glasgow, which was recently European City of Architecture and Design – all are looking towards new avenues of consumption to construct their identities. Lifestyles and the way in which lifestyles transform city cultures seem to be fundamental to what it means to be a post-modern city.

Many post-modern theorists have used Las Vegas as an illustration of what constitutes the post-modern city. Las Vegas, as McGuigan (1999) suggests, is a symbol of commodified fun, glitz and bright lights. Having visited Las Vegas myself recently, the most striking thing about the city is the juxtaposition of styles. The Las Vegas Strip is a concoction of magical environments, casinos which provide an escape from the real world and a ticket into the worlds of Treasure Island, Paris, Egypt, Venice and New York, amongst others. It is a world in which the commodity and the ability to spend money on the commodity for the commodity's sake become all. The post-modern city is not a functional city. It plays with the consumer's senses. The post-modern city, like the post-modern world, is, above all, experimental. Indeed, Dear (2000) goes as far as to suggest that Las Vegas and the casinos that populate it amount to a series of film sets for

which ordinary people come to live, play and act out. . . . It is no longer possible to recognize the boundary between the screen and the street, between cinematic fantasy and the creation of the urban. Representations of cities are becoming cities. Life is becoming a virtual reality.' (p. 206).

Las Vegas is, of course, an extreme. But it also represents a world of extremes. To generalize from Las Vegas therefore can be and often is misleading. But what the Las Vegas example does provide is a microcosm of post-modern playfulness and entertainment. The world is changing and those changes are represented in the urban fabric of all our cities: in the form of themed pubs, cinema complexes, continental-style bars and eateries and in the juxtaposition of styles and the power of consumption that these symbolize.

The second area of post-modern culture identified by Strinati (1995) is post-modern cinema, which also prioritizes style ahead of content or substance. Whereas modern films may have adopted a predictable narrative style in the form of the classic Western or the Middle American romance, post-modern films prioritize spectacle and image at the expense of plot and social comment. You might therefore describe *The Matrix*, which constructs a world familiar and yet distant from our own, in which traditional notions of time and space are undermined, as post-modern in nature. However, many commentators argue that post-modern culture lacks originality. It simply reproduces elements from the past in a 'new' package. Certainly, *The Matrix* depends upon elements of traditional action films, but deals with them in original ways. Perhaps this is the essence of a post-modern film: the only sense of originality it can claim is built upon the foundations of the past. Pastiche is therefore an important aspect of post-modern film, as Connor (1997) notes. Terry Gilliam's strangely unusual and yet hauntingly familiar film *Brazil* therefore illustrates this point with the way in which it plays with history. It creates its own unique world but does so partly by parodying other films, including *Star Wars*. But perhaps, Connor makes his most important point when he says that 'it often seems though post-modernism in film is not a matter of a new dominant style so much as the corrosion of the very idea of such a dominant' (p. 199).

Jean Baudrillard (1993) discusses the impact of 'post-modern' cinema in some detail. He points out, for instance, that post-modern films, regardless of their quality, somehow leave us feeling completely indifferent. Very often they are reproductions of historical periods and also of films depicting those periods. A good example of this process might be *The Talented Mr Ripley*, which portrays the idealist hedonism associated with upper middle-class lifestyles in sun-drenched 1950s Italy. These sorts of film amount to flawless, hallucinatory 'artefacts'. They simulate reality

Strinati goes on to discuss post-modern television. Much of contemporary television is indeed perhaps archetypally post-modern insofar as it so often appears to prioritize style and surface impression over substance. The programmes produced on British television by Chris Evans' company Ginger Productions, such as *Don't Forget Your Toothbrush* and *TFI Friday*, might therefore be described as post-modern insofar as they are very much style-led. The viewer is encouraged into the stylistic (and some would say ironically formulaic) world that Chris Evans has created. Douglas Kellner has considered the nature of post-modern television in considerable depth. For Kellner (1992), in post-modern television, 'image takes precedence over narrative, as compelling and highly expressive and non-realist aesthetic images detach themselves from the television diegesis and become the centre of fascination, of a seductive pleasure, of an intense but highly transitory aesthetic experience' (p. 146).

For the above reasons, television provides an especially useful illustration of post-modern culture. But according to Kellner it is misleading to suggest that post-modern culture is necessarily flat. In contrast, television can play an important role in the construction of identity, an issue to which I shall return later. Kellner illustrates this point with his discussion of *Miami Vice*, which, as he points out, is many critics' favourite example of post-modern television. Sure enough, *Miami Vice* prioritizes image at the expense of narrative plot. There is a plot there, but that plot is subservient to the pastel-coloured incubated world through which Crockett and Tubbs pass. This is a seductive and artificial world far removed from traditional images of police work. In this context, the story appears to be a mere afterthought. Kellner, however, argues that this emphasis on style and surface also incorporates meaning. This is not depthlessness then, but a political comment on the fragmentation and fragility of contemporary identities. The same might be said of the highly successful Mafia family drama *The Sopranos*, with its cinematic production values, and luscious soundtrack.

According to Strinati (1995), advertising also provides a graphic illustration of the impact of post-modern culture. In the modern world advertising was functional. Of course it tried to persuade, but it did so by celebrating the quality of the product or service concerned. Post-modern advertising, and apparently the vast majority of advertising we consume today, is far more dependent upon stylistic concerns. It appears to be about using the most impressive and memorable imagery to ensure that a product is retained in the consumer's mind. Strinati seems to be suggesting that advertising has, in effect, become a parody of itself. It is not about quality, but about which advertisement stretches stylistic boundaries. Advertising campaigns for Guinness have always been at the forefront of this.

this respect. One of its most recent commercials features a surreal sequence with surfers and white horses. The relevance of the images to the actual product concerned is negligible, but the production values are also incredibly high. The latter can also be said of another Guinness commercial, which is focused on an Italian village and which features a retired swimming champion racing to cover a particular distance in time to collect his pint of Guinness before it is completely poured; thereby maintaining a long-held village tradition. In effect, it is a race (which incidentally is rigged in favour of the swimmer) between the swimmer and the pint of Guinness. This commercial is unusual in the sense that it gives a post-modern gloss to a modernist frame. The village concerned gives the feeling of a scenic idyllic community set somewhere in the past: an escape from the harsh realities of the urban world. It is therefore a romantic vision, made possible by cinematic principles and not inconsiderable finance. In this setting a pint of Guinness would appear to be alien to your typical drinker. But far from it; the images created offer a means of escape: an unreal world accessible through the consumption of a commodity. In a previous incarnation Guinness was promoted as a healthy nutritious drink. Now it has become a lifestyle indicator.

The final area discussed by Strinati is that of popular music, which in its post-modern guise is very much about the mixing and matching of styles and genres. William Orbit's *Songs in a Modern Style* is a good example of this. Orbit takes a series of classical pieces of music and reinvents them in a contemporary electronic fashion. This reflects an apparent tendency in post-modern culture to borrow and regurgitate from the past. Orbit's is different in one sense: it provides a new take on old pieces of music, but in another it is lacking a certain sense of originality. It depends on the past. Other musicians referred to as 'post-modern' by Strinati include the Pet Shop Boys and Talking Heads. The latter incorporate a diversity of styles, including the exploration of 'world music', while the former adopt a very playful image which gives their own slant to what constitutes disco music. This constitutes a rejection of divisions between serious and fun pop music. Post-modern music plays with conventional categories. This is not functional music, but music that attempts to confound expectations. From another point of view, however, post-modern popular music might well be criticized for being unoriginal. The work of Oasis is a case in point. Many commentators in the popular press have remarked how the work of Oasis, one of the biggest-selling bands of the 1990s, amounts to little more than a reworking of the Beatles both musically and image-wise. Ironically, and intentionally so, the band's latest album is entitled *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*.

Another illustration of post-modernism's apparent lack of originality is the increasing popularity of tribute bands. Bands like 'The

Again and the Bootleg Beatles have been enormously successful in a culture that appears to be obsessed with regurgitating the past. Consumers of popular music often only appear to be comfortable with the predictable and the safe. Indeed, many bands who split up in the 1980s and early 1990s have since reformed and in doing so are very much dependent upon the good will generated by their back catalogues. Bands such as Culture Club, Blondie, the Human League and Duran Duran are cases in point. They are actively trading on fans nostalgic for their teenage years. Culture Club, Duran Duran and the Human League have even toured together with the clear intention of squeezing whatever was possible out of this desire for nostalgia. In this sense post-modernism is contradictory. It can reconstruct and reinvent the past in predictable ways, but it can also be innovative and obtuse. Many bands are pursuing new avenues of creativity. The boy and girl band may continue to play a key role in the charts, but many other artists are pursuing highly original avenues of expression. Radiohead, for instance, released their album *Kid A* without actually promoting any singles. The style of this record was entirely different to their previous releases and was in many senses uncommercial in nature, even insofar as it was made easily accessible on the internet. Certainly, as far as the band were concerned, originality rather than commerciality was the key.

Post-modern pop music, as is post-modern culture in general, is therefore remarkable for its eclectic nature. In this context, image is indeed prioritized over content. Hence many commentators have discussed the role of MTV as the archetypal media enactment of post-modernism. As a music channel, MTV clearly prioritizes image at the expense of narrative. In this sense, viewing MTV appears to be about a quick fix: consuming image after resplendent image, one after the other. Indeed, Tetzlaff (1986) sees MTV as a mirror image of the ideal post-modern text: 'Fragmentation, segmentation, superficiality, stylistic jumbling, the blurring of mediation and reality, the collapse of the past and future into the moment of the present, the elevation of hedonism, the dominance of the visual over the verbal' (p. 80). This quotation raises a key question: is post-modernism in some sense inauthentic? Does it promote a particular view of the world in which consumerism and the maximization of the present is all? Perhaps so, but the main idea to remember here is that a post-modern world is an eclectic world and one in which you as an individual are in constant danger of being overloaded:

Eclecticism . . . of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald'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. It is easy to find a public for eclectic

By becoming kitsch art panders to the confusion which reigns in the of the patrons. Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow in the 'anything goes,' and the epoch is one of slackening. (Hard, 1984, p. 76)

Modern identity construction

I have outlined some of the cultural expressions of post-modernism, and it would be useful to take one step back and to consider the broader context in which debates surrounding modernity and post-modernity have arisen. As I noted in Chapter 1, social theorists have always, in one form or another, been preoccupied with the question of social change. In the post-modern era, this preoccupation has become at one and the same time more acute and yet less focused. It is more focused in the sense that social theorists have begun to concentrate on a specific debate as to whether the social world is undergoing some epochal change or shift. On the other hand, such a debate is so diverse and is constituted by such a variety of conflicting opinions that it is virtually impossible to make any sense of what is actually being said. By focusing on a key issue, that of the post-modern identity, an issue which preoccupies many post-modern theorists, we may be able to make more sense of this theoretical quagmire.

The question of identity construction is crucial to the debate over modernity in the sense that many theorists argue that social change is such that the nature of identity constructions are fundamentally different to what they were in the past. In other words, the nature of society is changing and as a result so is the nature of those who populate that society. The overwhelming theme of post-modern conceptions of identity in general is that the onus for the construction of such identities increasingly falls on the shoulders of the individual. There is some resonance here with debates over the nature of society, which I discuss in Chapter 7. Basically, the possibilities and choices facing the individual are notably more extensive in a post-modern world, and without the traditional supports we associate with modernity, such as strong family networks, community and organized religion, the individual is seen to interpret and negotiate the world individually and from one minute to the next. The individual is increasingly self-dependent, but increasingly vulnerable as a result. This issue, as I note in Chapter 8, is also closely tied up with the changing nature of the relationship between the global and the local. In a post-modern world an individual's identity is less likely to be locally based and more likely to be the product of global social relations. In effect, 'the level of time-space distancing introduced by high modernity is so extensive that, for the first time in

human history, "self" and "society" are interrelated in a global milieu' (Giddens, 1991, p. 32).

As one of those authors who doubts the extent to which we can call such a shift epochal or 'post-modern', Giddens prefers to talk about the impact of 'high modernity'. In this context, he suggests that the self becomes a 'reflexive project'. The individual finds him- or herself in a situation in which identities are constantly being renegotiated in light of the rapidity of social change. For Giddens (1991), then, in a changing world, we are not what we are, but what we make ourselves across time and space. In this environment identities are inherently insecure.

Debates over post-modernity become confusing because those authors who do talk about a radical change in the nature of the social world appear to be discussing the same sorts of trend as those who do not. The important thing to remember in this regard is that although such authors may well disagree as to the magnitude of the changes involved, those changes are still broadly speaking the same or at least similar. Many theorists of the post-modern argue that contemporary societies are increasingly directionless and so are identities as a result. The key point here then is that whereas life in modernity was very much about maintaining a strong sense of who and what you are, in a post-modern world people appear to be intent on actively avoiding such stability. In effect, as Bauman (1996) notes, in a post-modern world people appear to be concerned with actively avoiding commitment,

And so the snag is no longer how to discover, invent, construct, assemble (even buy) an identity, but how to prevent it from sticking. Well constructed and durable identity turns from an asset into a liability. The hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building, but avoidance of fixation. (p. 24)

In a world where culture is composed of isolated, disconnected parts, the construction of any form of coherent identity becomes increasingly difficult because in effect there are no secure foundations upon which an identity can be constructed. The individual is left to run riot in a constant struggle to locate him- or herself in a chaotic shifting cultural landscape. The individual resides in the spectacular present and his or her identity is inevitably and perpetually in a state of flux as a result. In short, there appears to be no such thing as a coherent core identity in a post-modern world. As such, many theorists go as far as to discuss 'the death of the subject' – the notion that in a post-modern society there can be no such thing as a unified identifiable self. If we reconsider the aspects of popular

culture full of signs, of imagery and of constant change. Such change is so important to how we might experience life on a day-to-day basis, the consumption of these signs, of the popular culture, could be said to become the very core of our identity. Meanwhile, the so-called 'death of the subject' is the fact that we can barely even identify any core identity. It means that people are becoming increasingly individualized, more flexible, emotional and intent on being themselves. It is therefore to be assumed that the death of the subject is an inevitable consequence of social change. It gives the individual a sense of well as uncertainty:

The modern individual is characterized by an absence of strong identity. . . . S/he is a floating individual with no distinct reference parameters. . . . The post-modern individual favours dispersion of attention, the unrehearsed rather than the carefully organized. S/he values choice, free expression, individual participation, private personal liberation, without any need of universalistic claims or consistency. S/he is . . . the disintegrating patchwork of a self with a disparate personality and a potentially confused identity. (Kellner, 1992, pp. 54-5)

As Kellner's discussion of post-modern identity illustrates the complexities and uncertainties associated with post-modernism. The post-modern world is fluid and uncertain, 'the overwhelming variety of subjectivities and possibilities for identity, in an affluent image culture no longer able to sustain highly unstable identities while constantly providing new images to restructure one's identity' (Kellner, 1992, p. 174). An individual makes and remakes his or her identity, but ultimately and fundamentally that identity is fragile.

15

What lessons can we learn from discussions of social theory's association with debates concerning post-modernity? Do these debates really have any substance or do they in fact reflect the views of the people presenting such views more than the actual social change itself? First, debates over post-modernism are never what may or may not be the most appropriate terminology to describe social change (Kellner, 1992). But in that context, how do we evaluate post-modernity? Perhaps the most crucial point to note is the degree to which post-modernists exaggerate the trends of social change. There cannot be any doubt that we live in a rapidly

changing world, but because post-modernists believe this to be self-evidently the case they may well exaggerate the extent to which such changes alter people's life experiences. In other words, they might be said to be predisposed to a vision of rapid social change. They exaggerate what might well be genuine patterns of social change, but the playful way in which they do so overplays their hand. The position which so many post-modernists adopt, one that rejects the possibility of human progress, by its very nature also dismisses the possibility of scientific advancement and the sorts of trends associated with debates concerning the emergence of a post-industrial society. The links between the cultural and the economic are therefore woefully neglected. Ironically this creates a vision of a world in which social change is predisposed.

One of the most outspoken critics of post-modernism is Alex Callinicos (1989), who draws attention to the degree of social change being monitored here. His position is clear: 'Now I reject all this. I do not believe we live in a "New Times," in a "postindustrial and postmodern age" fundamentally different from the capitalist mode of production globally dominant for the last two centuries' (p. 4). Callinicos's argument is that the debate over post-modernism actually tells us far more about the political disillusionment of the intelligentsia than it does about the changes they actually describe. In an apparently changing world which appears to be dominated by the superficial appeals of consumerism, intellectuals are struggling to retain some sense of their own identity. The political left and the role of intellectuals within the left is highly circumspect. Post-modernism is a means of expressing a deep disillusionment with this process, alongside what amounts to a declaration of defeat: an acceptance of consumer lifestyles. Post-modernism, then, is born from frustration and helplessness and a recognition that social scientists, in particular, can no longer claim to be capable of changing the world.

Beyond the above general concern about what intellectual trends might motivate a post-modern position, post-modern theory can also be criticized on several further counts. Above all, perhaps, many people who read original post-modern texts argue this approach asks more questions than it actually answers. It is almost as if to write a post-modern piece is to join a particular club or creed in which it is more important to portray a particular image or style than it is to say anything significant. Post-modernism is arguably far too abstract for its own good. As a result it is distanced from the very aspects of cultural life that it attempts to describe. In short, it often seems that post-modernists are simply trying to out 'post-modern' each other. The 'reasoning' for this might be that, as Lash (1990) argues, there is no sense in which we can distinguish between any form of reality; we

does in a world in which any opinion, point of view or perspective is as valid as any other. Most post-modernists would argue, then, that to present empirical evidence is a pointless waste of time. You cannot prove anything about post-modernity; you can only interpret it from your own personal and unique perspective.

Let us consider one example of an author who playfully uses a post-modern perspective to comprehend a particular aspect of contemporary social life in the above way. Morris Holbrook might be described as a consumer researcher. That is, he is concerned with consumption and consumers. In one particular article, Holbrook (1997) discusses his and his wife's decision to purchase a vacation property in Long Island, USA. Using his vacation experiences as a means of illustrating the fact that consumers seek consumption experience at the edge of adventure, Holbrook goes on to present a series of 'stereographic' picture postcards which depict aspects of his own family's consumption experiences. He does not claim that this material will help us to come to any broader conclusions about the nature of consumer society. Indeed, if he were to do so, he may undermine his very own 'post-modernness'. His analysis is an entirely idiosyncratic one. But as such, what does it actually achieve? It is introspective for post-modernism's sake. The mere implication that the reader should be interested in the first place is itself self-indulgent. The danger, then, is that to be post-modern is more about fulfilling a particular creed or academic style than it is about achieving real theoretical insights. In its more regrettable forms, post-modernism advocates pluralism and yet produces dogmatic pieces of indifferent rhetoric.

The implication of the above is that post-modernism amounts to an over-intellectualized movement that jumps far too easily to highly subjective and deeply questionable impressions of the world. As I suggested earlier the nearest a lot of post-modern work actually gets to providing evidence to back up claims about the fragmented media-saturated world in which we live is to gesticulate about the post-modern MTV viewer who passively sits in front of his or her screen, letting image after image wash over him or her. In this situation content is irrelevant. The consumer is satisfied with imagery that need not test his or her intellect, but simply feeds a need to consume the superficial. The problem with this image is, first, that it is imaginary. On what basis does representation purport to reflect how consumers really interact with MTV? As a text MTV may be quintessentially post-modern, but no assumptions should or can be made about how that text might be consumed. These things *do* require empirical investigation. That empirical investigation may not *prove* anything, but at least it can provide us with a means of extending the insights provided by the same which can only take us so far alone. More pointedly,

even if the portrayal of the MTV viewer is an accurate one, it may well be an atypical portrayal. In other words, very few people are likely to have access to the joys of MTV, and thus to generalize on that basis is misleading. Perhaps the more important point is that there are millions of 'consumers' out there who simply do not have access to the satellite and digital images that authors such as Jean Baudrillard (1983) are referring to. Some people do; others don't. And just because some people do have such access doesn't mean to say that we all necessarily live in a qualitatively different world as a result. This point may well reinforce suspicions that post-modernism is very much a middle-class phenomenon, a case of middle-class academics describing middle-class lifestyles. Mike Featherstone (1991) might well talk about the aestheticization of everyday life, but the degree to which such an analysis applies to the majority of post-modern consumers can only be doubted. Perhaps post-modernism is simply about the emergence of a new middle class.

One of the consequences of a post-modern mode of thought is the decline of the meta-narrative. This is related to the suggestion that modernity is about progress and that society is always advancing in some form or another. In short, post-modernity is associated with the demise of the Enlightenment project. Nobody believes any more that the world is moving towards some bright liberated future. From this point of view meta-narratives are redundant. We can no longer use totalizing systems of thought to explain the world and to predict the direction in which it is going. Systems of thought such as Marxism, psychoanalysis and Christianity no longer have any claim to the truth because there is no such thing as truth. It is for this reason, as I suggested above, that empirical exploration is apparently a pointless exercise. But critics of post-modernism have pointed out the underlying paradox of this line of thought. The very suggestion that meta-narratives have no role to play is a meta-narrative in itself, because it enforces a particular view of the world on those people who consume it. To assume that there is no such thing as truth and everybody's interpretation is equally as invalid as everybody else's is to create a totalizing system of thought. Baudrillard's discussion of the media is particularly over-arching in nature and presents a very opinionated and inclusive theory. He simplifies the phenomena he discusses because the notions that inform his analysis, such as the dominance of the media, are based on generalizations. And he does so in the name of post-modernism, or at least that label is attributed to him. Post-modernists, from this point of view, are imposing their own vision of the world upon us, consumers of social theory.

Students of social theory are often disappointed with post-modernism because it is so difficult to pin it down. Ultimately how

tant asset. The fact that we are describing not an actual school of thought but an umbrella term for a wide variety of theoretical positions and turns is in itself an advantage. Post-modernism represents a way of looking at the world which as theorists we can dip in and out of at our leisure. We might not accept the extremities of a post-modern position or indeed the apparent extremities of the language used to put that position across. But the key thing about post-modernism is that it has opened up social theory to a whole raft of theoretical issues that previously remained unexplored. The rise of consumption as a key focus of social theory (see Chapter 4) has much to do with post-modernists putting consumption on the theoretical agenda. The rise of cultural studies is also indebted, at least in part, to the post-modern turn in social theory, in the sense that post-modernism is more willing to accept cultural and popular cultural objects of everyday life as meaningful in their own right. This book has never have been written but for the debates post-modernism has precipitated. However, ultimately, post-modernism has been hoisted on its own petard. Its free-for-all attitude to social theory as aligned with its precept that there is no such thing as absolute truth continues to create the impression, at least, of social theory for social theory's sake. A social theory that does not address the problems of the real world according to the social and political conditions that underlie it is hardly worth its own weight in hyper-real TV guides. The ultimate legacy of post-modern theory, then, is to undermine the notion of what it means actually to be a social theorist. If we accept the post-modern position that there is no such thing as reality, only representations of reality (Lash, 1990), and that we therefore cannot explain or understand the world in any meaningful fashion, then the social theorist is redundant. He or she has nothing meaningful to say. At the very least, post-modernism has forced social theorists to cower in a corner and contemplate their role in life. Moreover, any pretensions to political influence (despite some of the work being undertaken with the government by people such as Anthony Giddens) have had to be, at least for now, reconsidered. It is surely healthy for the social theorist to take a step back and consider the value of his or her work. If post-modernism has achieved this much, then it has achieved enough. Social theory may not be able to change the world or explain it, but at least with some more grounded conception of its uses it might at least provoke or enlighten (a word used advisedly) our understanding of the complex processes that lie behind our everyday lives. Post-modernism may not be the best way of understanding the sorts of social changes that are going on around us. On the other hand, it may represent the sort of metaphorical kick up the backside that social theory and social theorists so badly need.

Recommended reading

Fredric Jameson (1984) 'Post-modernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism', *New Review*, 146, 53–92. One of the single most important single articles on the question of post-modernism, this piece attempts to place post-modernism in the context of the changing nature of capitalism.

David Lyon (1994) *Postmodernity*, Buckingham: Open University Press. An ideal starting point which summarizes the main points of theoretical concern, including the key issue of post-modern consumption.

Pauline Marie Rosenau (1992) *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads and Intrusions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Once you have managed to get your head around the basics, this book provides an ideal means of extending your understanding of post-modernism, not least in the context of post-modern identity.

Dominic Strinati (1995) *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London: Routledge. Includes an especially useful section on the cultural manifestations of post-modernism.