

Post-Modernism Notes Nick Campion

As with Modernism, there are two main definitions of post-modernism:

1. As a historical period which follows modernism (post-modernity)
2. As a cultural trend which rejects modernism

Also, as with modernism, these two can overlap.

The core features of post-modernism include:

- A loss of faith in the future
- A turning back to the past for inspiration
- Pluralism - a belief in multiple truths (as opposed to the single truths of modernism) – cultural relativism
- The belief that all phenomena can be read as texts, discourses or narratives, the implication being that they require interpretation and hence that truth lies in the eye of the beholder as much as, or more so than in, the phenomenon itself. This is relatively uncontroversial when applied to the creative arts, controversial when applied to the humanities and social sciences, and highly contentious when applied to science.

Resulting concepts include **hyper-reality** (Baudrillard) which taken to its extreme (e.g. as applied to the first gulf war) argues that what we regard as the 'real' world is no more real than a video game.

Post-structuralism – the meaning the reader perceives is more important than that intended by the creator.

Deconstruction – texts can be deconstructed – i.e., subject to analyses which reveal that no one interpretation is more true than any other.

Intertextuality – the use of texts to add meaning to other texts.

Hegemony – the meaning of texts and knowledge is shaped by political power (although, strictly this is a NeoMarxist concept, and Marxism, with its single-truth creation of the future, is far from Postmodern)

[Postmodernity's] root meaning, to be beyond or after the modern, remains common to diverse usages...One of the reasons it became potent was its suggestive ambiguity, the way it specified the departure point, but left open the final destination.¹

The term itself hovers uncertainly in most current writings between – on the one hand – extremely complex and difficult philosophical senses, and – on the other hand – an extremely simplistic mediation as a nihilistic, cynical tendency in contemporary culture.²

There is hardly a single field of intellectual endeavour which has not been touched by the *spectre* of 'the postmodern'. It leaves its traces in every cultural discipline from architecture to zoology, taking in on the way biology, forestry, geography, history,

¹ Jencks, *The Post-modern Reader*, p.10

² Docherty, Thomas, p.1

law literature and the arts in general, medicine, politics, philosophy, sexuality, and so on.³

To those who believe in a single reality, ruled by a set of universal laws (to which there is of course no appeal), and therefore approachable only by eliminating (or reducing to an insignificant residue) the merely personal, unique and “subjective”, this is indeed anathema...and undoubtedly irrational.⁴

Lyotard uses the word *modern*,

To designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind...such as the dialectic of Reason, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.⁵

Accordingly, postmodernism deals with, and deliberately creates paradoxes or ‘differends’⁶ (differed-ends) to controvert the ideology of the grand narrative. Moreover, the postmodern response is always conditional and temporal, being concerned with tradition and limitation,

Post-Modernism

Post-Modernism I = historical period, after the modern, characterised by de-industrialisation in the west, globalisation

Post-Modernism IIa = a set of ideas resulting from reaction to, or loss of faith in, the modern

Post-Modernism IIb = as above but as a phenomenon of modernism.

postmodernism is both the ‘continuation and transcendence of modernism’.⁷

Origins

D.C. Somervell and Arnold Toynbee mark the beginning of a ‘post-Modern’ age in 1875 as ‘the fourth state of Western history after the Dark Ages’.⁸

Others identify post-modernity with 1914 after World War I or 1945 after World War II, or as late as the 1980s.⁹

3 Docherty, Thomas, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p.1 [hereafter Docherty, Thomas *Postmodernism: A Reader*]

4 Curry, Patrick, ‘Astrology: From Pagan to Postmodern?’, in *The Astrological Journal*, vol.36, N°1, pp.74

5 Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition*, in Rivkin, Julie & Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Massachusetts & Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998) p.511 [hereafter Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*]

6 Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Massachusetts & Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998) p.353 [hereafter Rivkin and Ryan]

7 Jencks, Charles, ‘The Post-Modern Agenda,’ *The Post-modernism Reader*, London, Academy, 1992: 10.

8 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991: 6.#

9 Jencks, Charles, ‘The Post-Modern Agenda,’ *The Post-modernism Reader*, London, Academy, 1992: 9-10.

Characterised by loss of faith in the modern

No single truth

(But does post-modernism, even if it espouses the notion of the multiple, assume, as a broad phenomenon the notion of the single truth?).

Loss of faith in scientism ('anti-science' movement)

Loss of faith in religious orthodox (→New Age)

the respect for differences and multiplicity is a cornerstone of the new era where no singular ideology overrides another; resistance to singular explanations about our reality¹⁰

Pluralistic¹¹

Democratic

Tuning to the past

nothing in life is fixed or predetermined, 'reality is unordered and ultimately unknowable'.¹²

there are no objective facts, only individual interpretations of what is true or false.

the only constructs therefore are those created by various individuals or groups¹³

theories drift unattached in a void.¹⁴

as a result of discoveries in quantum mechanics and elsewhere...it is apparent that what Newtonian science (the underpinning of modernity) conceived as matter (solid, massy, hard, impenetrable, movable particles in Newton's words) is more alive than dead....Every quantum experiment forces 'matter' to make choices, forces an electron to choose its position or momentum, and these operations show—if 'mind' is as arbitrary as matter'—what do they mean? Whatever the answer, quantum physics and the postmodern sciences of complexity show that partial self-determinism, the crucial aspect behind free will, is an inherent property at all levels in the universe.¹⁵

Postmodernism takes a perspectivist viewpoint where as compared with the modern view of universal consensus.

postmodern theory provides a critique of ... modern belief that theory mirrors reality, taking instead 'prespectivist' and 'relativist' positions that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects, and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated....Postmodern theory also rejects modern ... notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject."¹⁶

10 Jencks, Charles, 'The Post-Modern Agenda,' *The Post-modernism Reader*, London, Academy, 1992: 10.

11 Jencks, Charles, 'The Post-Modern Agenda,' *The Post-modernism Reader*, London, Academy, 1992: 10.

12 Best, Steven and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogation*. London: MacMillan, 1991, p. 9.

13 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991: 22.

14 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991, 127.

15 Jencks, Charles, *The Post Modern Agenda*, Academy Editions, 1991, p.11.

16 Best, Steven; Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991: 4-5.

But can post-modernism be authoritarian. It can if it lays claim to the special truth that there is no universal truth. For example, is multi-culturalism post-modern? And is multi-culturalism authoritarian? Especially in its alliance with secular fundamentalism.

The Problem – is astrology post-modern: Extract from Nick's PhD:

Looking at the context within which astrology thrives, Hess considers the New Age movement as a whole to be post-modern (1993: 36), although he offers no explanation for this. Paul Heelas, meanwhile considers the New Age movement in its counter-cultural aspects, and hence astrology, which he includes as New Age (1996: 23, 34), as an aspect of 'modernity in crisis' (1996: 138). However, he neither defines modernity nor explains why the New Age might not in fact be an aspect of modernism. Robert Bellah, however, did point to the crisis in modernity and the consequent shift in spirituality, which he identified as arising, in the USA at least, from 'the massive erosion of the legitimacy of American institutions - business, government, education, the churches, the family' (Bellah 1976: 333). Hexham and Poewe point out that the distinctions are not clear-cut and argue that the counter-culture of the 1960s contained elements of both modernism and post-modernism (1997: 149-151), while Patrick Curry has discussed astrology as a post-modern discipline (1994). Elsewhere some developments within astrology, such as the recovery of former traditions, are identified as post-modern (Campion 1994: 3) while others – such as the argument that astrology is a science that can be proved, or the New Age proposition that its widespread acceptance will change the world for the better - are clearly aspects of modernism (see for example Hand 1990: 15). The problem, of course is one of definition, for there is no universally accepted meaning of the terms modern and post-modern. Williams (1989: 33) notes that aspects of culture defined as modern, such as avant-garde art, are taken to be representative of 'modernity' as a whole while being quite clearly not representative of the entire modern world, while Jameson (1991: 55) asks whether it is even possible to say that the post-modern exists. If modernism is characterised by the self-confident creation of the future and, if modernists think 'compulsively about the New...(try) to watch its coming into being and look for 'new worlds' (Jameson 1991: ix), then the development of psychological astrology, the most influential development within modern professional astrology, may be an indicator of a modernist trend within twentieth-century astrology (Hand 1990: 15). If, though, modernity is defined as 'the social condition of living in an urban, fast-changing, progressivist world governed by instrumental reason' (Jencks 1996: 8) and postmodernism 'is what you have when the modernization process is complete' (Jameson 1991: ix), one could argue from a variety of different positions. The sociologists of science John Bauer and Martin Durant discussed the matter, agreeing with Heelas' view that astrology is encouraged by the crisis of modernity. They consider that astrology, may be regarded sociologically, as one among a number of potential compensatory activities that may be attractive to individuals who are struggling to come to terms with the uncertainties of life in late modernity...Belief in astrology is rather a matter of the moral fabric of modern society than of scientific literacy. It seems that in Britain, as in Germany or France, belief in astrology is prevalent among particular social groups; groups which, as we have indicated, may be experiencing difficulty in accommodating their religious feelings to life in an uncertain post-industrial culture. Paradoxical as it may seem, therefore, we conclude that popular belief in astrology may be part and parcel of late modernity itself (Bauer and Durant 1997: 69).

What is Astrology?

Dictionary definitions tend to emphasise celestial causality, as does the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1952) which describes astrology as 'the art of judging of reputed influence of stars upon human affairs'. To astrologers a more familiar definition would be that found in Margaret Hone's *The Modern Text Book of Astrology* (1973: 16) which emphasised not planetary causation but the 'interpretation of the correlation of planetary action in human

experience'. According to another prominent astrologer, Robert Hand (1989: 316), astrology is a 'taxonomy of life' while to Kelly Hunter (1999: 1) it is 'an intuitive science, the full power of... [which] lies in transforming consciousness through imagery'.

These might appear to be magical, religious or scientific, can be applied to understanding the past, the management of the present or the prediction of the future, and may be used for personal spiritual development or forecasting fluctuations in the stock market. For current purposes the working definition of astrology will be 'the practice of relating the heavenly bodies to lives and events on earth, and the tradition that has thus been generated' (Curry 1999: 55).

As Dennis Elwell realised (1986: 143), 'Astrology means different things to different people, and is big enough to accommodate many complementary, and even contradictory, opinions'. There may, in fact, be no one such single thing as astrology but rather different astrologies.

Does astrology's continued existence represents the anomalous survival of a pre-modern superstition in the modern world. Is it, as Adorno (1994: 36) claimed, 'basically discordant with today's universal state of enlightenment'?

Curry: Astrologers have subscribed to the universalism and monism of the mainstream (they adapt to the prevailing culture.¹⁷ Hence it is now post-modern as 'a dialogue with the divine in a post-modern, post-Christian, and newly reanimated universe'.¹⁸

What about different 'branches' of astrology?

Belief in scientific proof = modernist?

Psychological astrology = modernist?

Traditional astrology in some forms (Barclay-esque) = a need for certainty

Divination = a meta narrative involving access to higher truths.

Authoritarianism in modern astrology: associated with ??????????

Astrology deals with meaning. Postmodernism assumes meaninglessness. Therefore astrology cannot be postmodernist.

While appreciating PC's argument in the AJ (after all, I asked to publish it), there is a problem:

Whereas astrology as whole exhibits a measure of diversity and pluralism, all of its constituent parts (whether schools of thought or formal schools) assume either (a) that astrology contains (or reveals) the whole truth or that they (i.e. the school) contains the whole truth.

But even if we could identify areas of astrology which are not in themselves universalist, astrology as a whole still makes universal claims.

17 Curry, Patrick, 'Astrology: From Pagan to Postmodern?', *The Astrological Journal*, Vol. 36, No 1, Special History of Astrology Issue, January/February 1994.

18 Willis, Roy and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) [hereafter Willis, *Astrology*], p. 1.

(We should not be confused by schools of astrology which deny the validity of others yet are, in themselves, authoritarian and monist.)

Astrology is also structuralist. There is not a single school which rejects the idea of an underlying truth.

Forgetting PC's argument, with which I don't disagree (see below), the dominant argument that astrology is post-modern follows the following logic:

- Modernity is the bold rejection of superstition in favour of science etc.
- Post Modernity appeals to people who cannot cope with modernity
- Astrology appeals to people who cannot cope with the modern world
- Therefore astrology must be post-modern.

(In this scenario, modernism = good, postmodernism = bad. See below for quotes.)

The analysis of astrology as PM may reflect an ideal reality, but one which is not reflected on the ground.

Curry is, in my opinion, is correct in his analysis of events on the ground, is in the dominance of modernism in academic history in the 19th – most of the 20th c, and the consequent belittling of the history of astrology as a political move designed to reinforce the political agenda of modernism as an atheist, materialist, positivist force. In this sense, the introduction of PM into history has been constructive for the development of intelligent approaches to the history of astrology.

I also argue that post-modernism, in its emphasis on the validity of personal perspectives, has had a major and beneficial impact on some areas of academic work, including the investigation of astrology.

Astronomy's modernism has also been a problem for the understanding of astrology, but has been challenged:

Nick PhD: is astronomy modernist?

an historical anthropology of astronomy must emphasise the interaction between different cultural perspectives on history and time, rather than subsuming them within what is still a predominantly North Atlantic "World" perspective. Hence the need to deconstruct the universalising discourse of modern professional astronomy itself (still with an inbuilt tendency to appeal to a historicist account of its own past) if we are to arrive at an approach to the subject at once sociological and ethnoscientific, which recognises the recreation of different cultural histories as a more significant and viable prospect than an absolute (and inevitably ethnocentric) Universal History (Platt 1991: S83).

Astrologers and Modernism

New Age thought is generally considered postmodern. But, if the creation of a new world is modernist, is the belief in the coming New Age/Age of Aquarius modernist?

Nick PhD Questions 41 and 45 ix.

These questions were asked in order to establish levels of agreement with the notion that the New Age and Age of Aquarius are currently beginning, or are about to begin. The imminence of the arrival of the next age, as was noted in chapter 2, is a key feature of millenarian belief. Separate questions were asked about the New Age and the Age of Aquarius in order to allow

for those astrologers who might believe that the Age of Aquarius is beginning, but that this does not necessarily indicate the coming of the New Age as a time of spiritual evolution; that is, that the New Age and the Age of Aquarius are not identical. As a comparison, Rose (1996: 365) found that 69% of his respondents believed that 'we are entering a new era'.

The percentage stating that the New Age is beginning were significantly higher at the AA Conference than at UAC, but those stating that the Age of Aquarius is beginning were roughly comparable. Nevertheless, these figures indicate that around half, or over half, of all astrologers operate within a millenarian context.

However, only 22% at both AA and UAC claimed that the New Age is not beginning and around 10% stated that the Age of Aquarius is not beginning. Apart from indicating that a minority accept the Age of Aquarius while resisting the New Age, this suggests that a low positive figure might result from the phrasing of the question, which appears to call for a statement of objective fact (see the discussion in chapter 11).¹⁹

Table 6. The New Age and the Age of Aquarius.

New Age beginning	AA	UAC
Yes	97 (61%)	73 (48%)
No	36 (22.6%)	34 (22.4%)
Don't know	21 (13.2%)	33 (21.7%)
Age of Aquarius beginning		
Agree	88 (55.3%)	78 (51%)
Disagree	15 (9.4%)	16 (10.5%)
No opinion	12 (7.5%)	45 (29.6%)

Here's another angle: if we have never been modern, we can't be post-modern:

'No one has ever heard of a collective that did not mobilize heaven and earth in its composition, along with bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, powers and beliefs, beast and fictional beings... Such is the ancient anthropological matrix, the one we have never abandoned.... This is our Constitution, which attributes the role of nonhumans to one set of entities, the role of citizens to another, the function of an arbitrary and powerless God to a third and cuts off the work of mediation from that of purification'.²⁰

Key figures in post-modern thought

19 Campion, Nicholas, 'Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement: the extent and nature of contemporary belief in astrology', PhD thesis, University of the West of England 2004, pp. 246-7.

20 Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2006 [1991], p.107

Michel Foucault
Jacques Derrida
Zygmunt Bauman
Baudrillard
Lyotard
Roland Barthes