Explorative Research and Praxis

Postmodernism

That was the modern world.

The context of all art and design.

No design or artwork can be considered to be created in isolation.

All work has a cultural and historical significance.

Objects and ideas have a relationship with things that surround them.

Every history has a theory that shapes the way it is communicated.

Every theory has a history of how it has come into existence.

All art and design practice is situated amongst other practices.

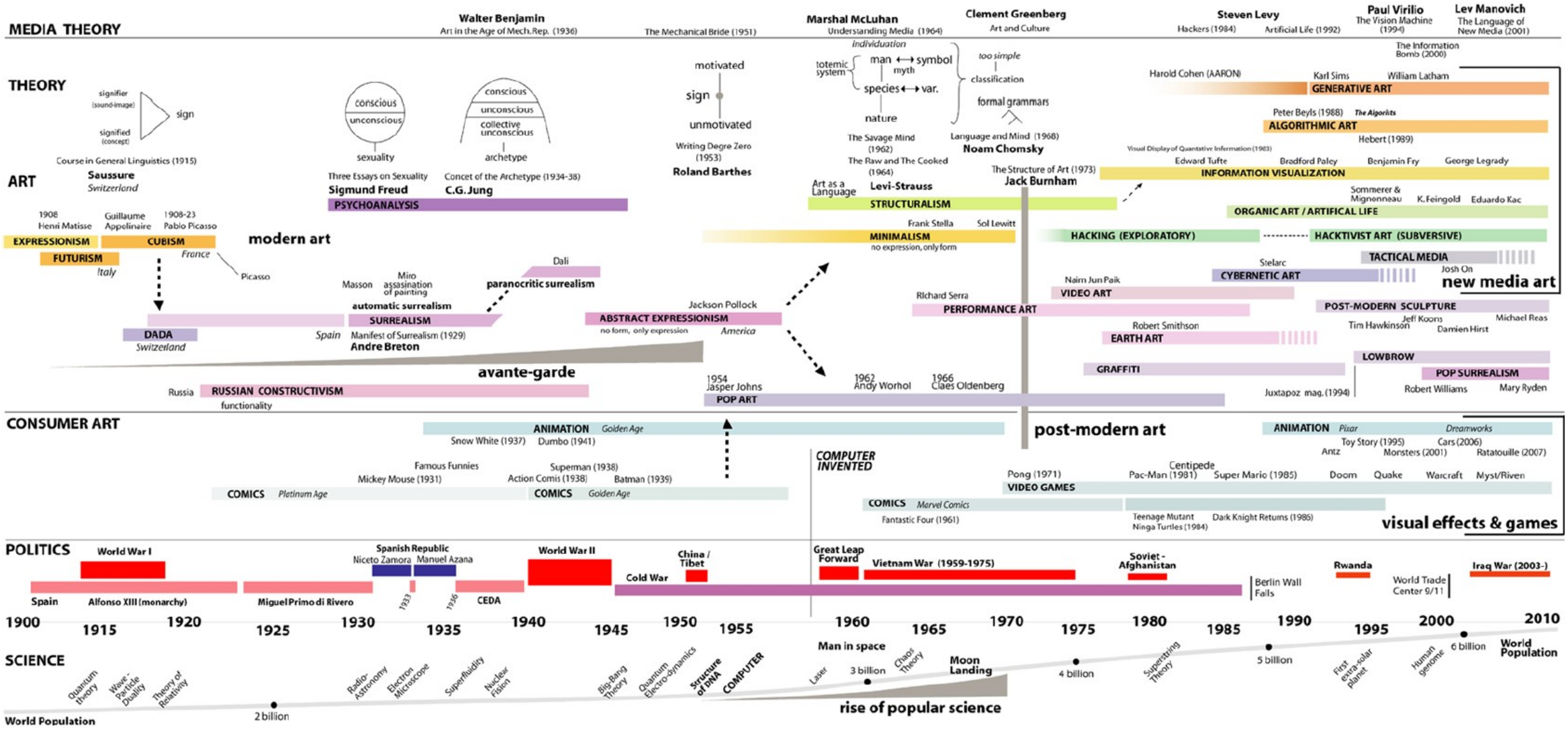
This practice is embedded into cultural, political, economic and philosophical frameworks.

Studying this context helps us to become active, independent researchers.

Where have we been, and where are we going?

Modernism and Postmodernism are the most significant cultural, literary, art and design movements of the last 120 years. It is extremely useful to be aware of their influence and significance in western societies.

They provide large areas of reference and critical study, so may be useful as research terms. If you work or practice in the arts, it is essential to have some knowledge of these two influential schools of thought.



Rama Hoetzlein, *Timeline of Twentieth Century Art and New Media*, 2009-2010

A complex critical theory

Postmodernism is notoriously difficult to define, which in itself is symptomatic of ‘postmodernism’.

It is often perceived as being in opposition to Modernism, but it is not.

It is a reaction or a response to Modernism, i.e. ‘post’ – after.

The V&A Museum, London, offers an introduction.



Jean François Lyotard 1924 - 1998

Lyotard was a French philosopher and writer who published *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979.

‘Lyotard characterized the postmodern era as one that has lost faith in all grand, totalizing “metanarratives”—the abstract ideas in terms of which thinkers since the time of the Enlightenment, have attempted to construct comprehensive explanations of historical experience.’ (britannica.com/biography/Jean-Francois-Lyotard)

The term Postmodernism was already being cited in the arts, philosophy and literature, but Lyotard's interpretation is the most widely acknowledged:

The Postmodern Condition

‘I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse … making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth …

I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.

(*The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii–xxiv)

Incredulity: the state of being unwilling or unable to believe something.

Metanarratives: an overarching account or interpretation of events and circumstances that provides a pattern or structure for people’s beliefs and gives meaning to their experiences.

Metanarratives (Grand Narratives)

The term Postmodernism attempts to consolidate the often differing accounts of numerous thinkers of the time such as Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.

Central to the philosophy is the questioning of ‘facts’ or ‘truths’, as postmodernists believe these only serve to distance us from reality.

Lyotard was driven by an unwillingness to accept societal or idealistic truths or historical stories that legitimise cultural practices. These broadly accepted truths were identified by postmodernists to be metanarratives or grand narratives.

Modernism and the ‘new’

The previous Modernist-defining principle was for improvement.

In art, design and society there was a belief that the new ways of thinking would progress and improve the lives of everyone - new types of housing, new political movements, new objects to purchase, new approaches to production, new materials, new forms of representation in art and design.

Modernism and progress

Art and design movements such as Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism, Bauhaus; and political movements such as Socialism, Fascism and Capitalism each provided a clearly defined ideology that suggested that if their principles were followed, things could, and would improve.

There was an inherent belief in human progress through the development of human knowledge. Reason and science was clearly aligned to progress.

The questioning of Modernist ideals

Having witnessed the failures of the early 20th century, there was universal skepticism towards universal ideologies. The world had witnessed two wars that were driven by political ideologies, or metanarratives. Postmodernism was perceived to be an antidote or remedy.

The new way of thinking

Postmodernism believes that when universal ideologies are questioned and deconstructed, there is a realisation and an awareness that the difference between ‘perception’ and ‘truth’ are socially constructed distinctions

In Postmodernism, race, class and gender; and power structures such as those relied on in politics and religion, are not accepted as universal truths but that they are only presented as such.

Postmodernism looks to deconstruct these established hierarchies allowing the individual to define their validity. Individual subjective choice is seen as more valid than the fixed meanings and truths presented by modernism previously.

The Death of the Author

Postmodernism also subscribes to the theory that all art and literary works, i.e. ‘texts’, have no single unique meaning, moreover individuals derive their own meanings from these works.

The 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*, published by Roland Barthes, apposes the idea that a literary work should be analysed in relation to the person who produced the work, but moreover, that the audience shapes the meaning of any given text. Postmodernism promotes a reader-response, whilst rejecting the notion of ‘authorial intent’:

‘The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.’ (Barthes, R.)

Characteristics of Postmodernism in art and design

Pluralism

Appropriation

Complexity

Contradiction

Irony

Intertextuality

Hyperreality

Historical reference

Ornamentation and pattern

Bold colours and shapes

Form (does not) follow function

Everyday materials into valuable objects

Layering

Humour, wit, parody and pastiche

Combinations of high/low culture

Symbolic reference

Postmodern advertising

Postmodern audiences are no longer manipulated by advertising messages. They respond to them with a clear understanding of advertising's function – to sell. Postmodern advertising tends to be irreverent and self-referential.

The Cadbury's chocolate Gorrilla TV commercial makes little attempt to represent 'truth' or to formally sell the product. It is informal, and does not even carry a call to action, which is an advertising necessity. It pushes the boundaries of traditional modern advertising.

The homage to Phil Collins's famous music track, *'In the air tonight',* is intertextual and dissolves boundaries between high low/culture.

Cadbury’s Gorrilla, 2007





American designer April Greiman (along with early collaborator Jayme Odgers) used postmodern graphic styles throughout the 80's and 90''s. She was widely recognized as one of the first designers to embrace computer technology as a design tool.



Grayson Perry CBE
artist, Turner prize winner,
cross dresser, ceramicist,
writer, broadcaster,
cultural commentator,
husband and father.

Grayson Perry’s Postmodern identity

- International award winning artist
- Uses the classical form of pottery to deconstruct popular culture
- Artworks parody home crafts such as tapestry and textiles
- Folk art based practice (ceramics, textiles, performance)
- Uses fantasy and childhood memories in his artworks
- Has created a dual identity - an alter ego ‘Claire’
- Transvestitism is part of his gender identity
- Keen biker and Harley Davidson motorcycle owner
- TV personality

New Order:
Power, Corruption & Lies
1983
By Peter Saville

The album artwork reappropriates the 1890 *painting A Basket of Roses* by French artist Henri Fantin-Latour, which is part of the *National Gallery's* permanent collection in London. The cover has no text, just a colour based code derived by Saville.



Postmodern narrative.

Spike Jonze 2013 film, *Her,* has a Postmodernist (and Posthumanist) narrative that questions the core of relationships by suggesting the possibility that artificial intelligence could provide the same companionship that is looked for in a partner.

Every aspect of ‘Samantha’ (the AI character) is identifiable as being human, (i.e. compassionate, caring, empathetic, responsive, funny, creative), other than the fact that she is an operating system on a smartphone. The metanarrative questioned here is whether it is necessary to be human to have a fulfilling relationship with another human. Irrelevant of biology/substance the relationship is still perceived and real.



The Vitra *Wiggle* Side Chair designed by Frank Gehry.

The material used to make this aesthetically pleasing and robust piece of furniture is everyday and relatively inexpensive. Corrugated cardboard and hardboard are reimagined into a stylish piece of furniture.





Inntel Hotel, Netherlands. 2010.
WAM Architecten.

The design of a traditional Dutch house has been multiplied and stacked in the design of this hotel building.

Postmodernist architecture is a reaction to formulaic, conservative and austere forms in the use of design, materials, form and colour.

Postmodernism and digital media.

The uncertainty of universal truths is indicative of postmodernity. Digital transformation has promoted the exponential development of an immersive and constant, media-saturated world where the distinction between media representation and reality is becoming blurred. This questioning of perceived reality makes the identification between reality and hyperreality increasingly problematic.

Hyperreality

As postmodernism rejects the authority of all texts, judgements are now based on opinions. Therefore the difference between reality and the media is now collapsing. Images represent other images, and are competing with each other. Representations are no longer wholly based on reality as they were previously. This is known as hyperreality - a concept attributed to French philosopher Jean Baudrillard.

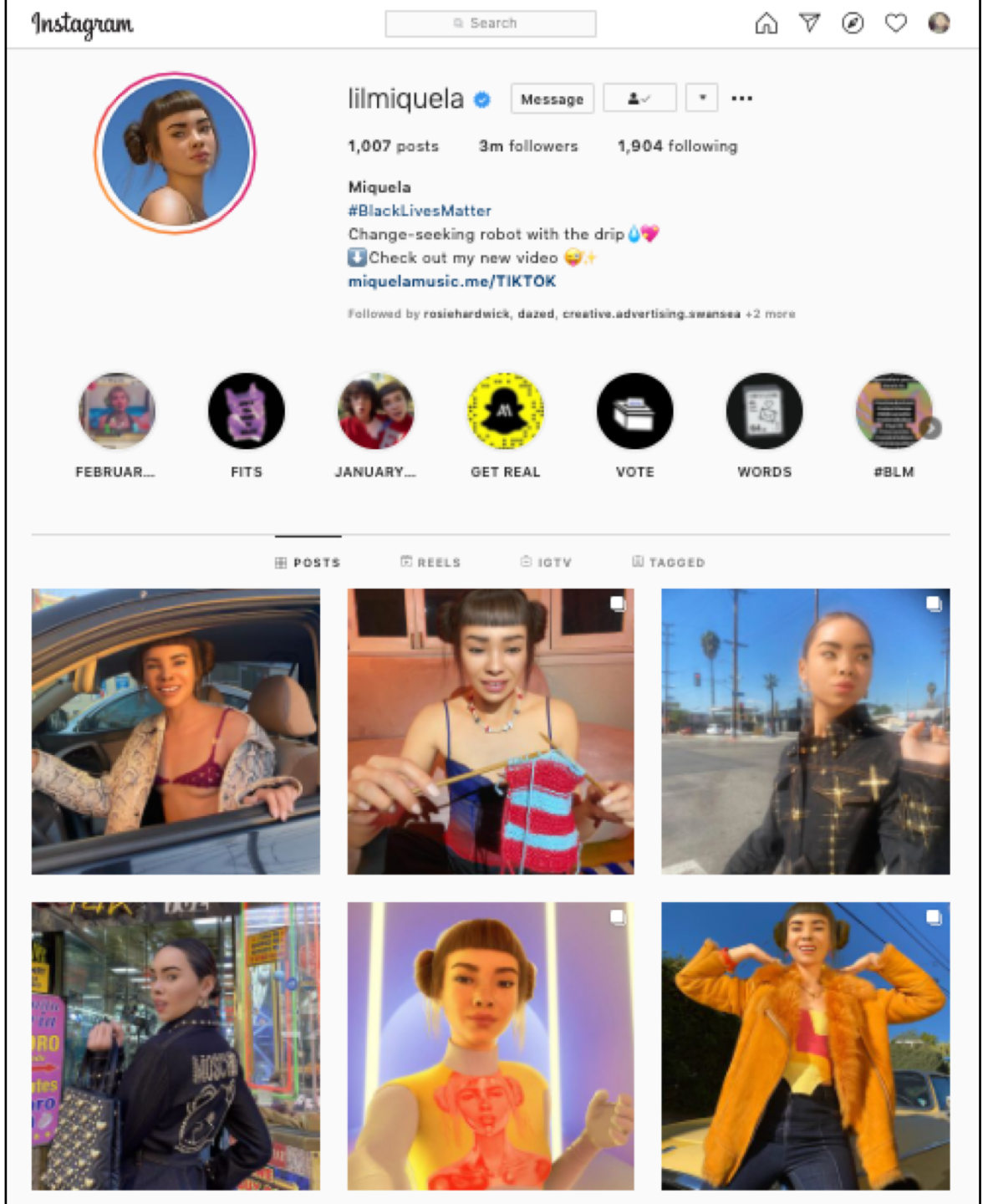
Jean Baudrillard (1929 – 2007).

Baudrillard defined the media saturated world as hyperreality. Images on video games are no different to live footage on the news. Reality is no longer identifiable. These fictional images have come to represent reality – this he described as simulacra.

Disneyland is an example of a fictional world with no basis in reality. Representations are now playing a large part in society from the social media constructions of our curated identities to the purchasing of products because of what they represent, rather than their inherent qualities.

One of the most prevalent areas to find hyperreality is online.

Lil Miquela ‘Influencers are being upended by Virtual Influencers, and these CGI avatars may be disrupting something even more integral: truth. Miquela is a caricature of many users’ own Insta presence. We strive for and fawn over her exaggerated life, but ignore the warning: it’s not real. ‘Virtual Influencers do not *make* social media fake—social media platforms predicated on celebrating fictional ideologies of life grew to create an environment now ripe for fictional characters to step in and succeed.’ *(Forbes)*



Deepfake technology.

There are also however potential positive opportunities to be derived from simulacra.

In the 2018 campaign advertisement for *'Malaria Must Die, So Millions Can Live',* deepfake technology is utilised to make ex footballer David Beckham appear to speak fluently about malaria in 9 different languages including Spanish, Arabic, Hindi and Mandarin, in addition to his own native English.



Conclusion

Postmodernism continues to challenge the foundations of objective reality, with skepticism towards morality, truth, human nature, reason, science, language, and social progress.

Postmodern thinkers frequently describe knowledge claims and value systems as being interdependent or socially-constructed.

Deriving from discussions around literature postmodernism has grown into a significant contemporary, cultural discourse.

Next lecture:

Semiotics

signs and signification