# Modernism v Postmodernism

The features in the table below are only tendencies, not absolutes. In fact, the tendency to see things in seemingly obvious, binary, contrasting categories is usually associated with modernism. The tendency to dissolve binary categories and expose their arbitrary cultural co-dependency is associated with postmodernism.

| MODERNISM | POSTMODERNISM |
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| • Using rational, scientific, logical means to know the world. Optimism that we can understand and control an objective world | • A reaction against rationalism, scientism, or objectivity of modernism. |
| • There is an absolute, universal truth that we can understand through rationalism and logic. | • There is no universal truth. Rationality by itself does not help us truly understand the world. |
| • Humans are material machines. We live in a purely physical world. Nothing exists beyond what our senses perceive. | • Suspicious of such dogmatic claims to knowledge. |
| • Humankind is progressing by using science and reason. | • "Progress" is a way to justify the domination by European culture of other cultures. |
| • Time, history, progress | • Culture on Fast Forward: Time and history replaced by speed, futureness, accelerated obsolescence. |
| • history as a "narrative of what happened" with a point of view and cultural/ideological interests. | • Postmodern historians and philosophers question the representation of history and cultural identities: history as "what 'really' happened" is from one group's point of view |
| • Faith in "Depth" (meaning, value, content, how things work) over "Surface" (appearances, the superficial, how we use things). | • Attention to play of surfaces, images, things mean what we make them mean, no concern for "depth" but with how things look and respond |
| • "disenchantment with material truth and search for abstract truth." | • "There is no universal truth, abstract or otherwise." |
| • Faith in the "real" beyond media and representations; authenticity | • Hyper-reality, image saturation, simulacra seem more powerful than |

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| of "originals" | the "real"; images and texts with no prior "original".<br>"As seen on TV" and "as seen on MTV" are more powerful than unmediated experience. |
| **TIME LINE** | |
| • (Renaissance?) Enlightenment > 1750s > 1890-1945. | • Post WWII, especially after 1968 |
| **GENERAL** | |
| • Attempt to acheive a unified, coherent world-view from the fragmentation that defines existence | • Attempt to overturn the distinction between "high" and "low" culture |
| • High Modernism 1920s & 1930s, following WWI -- outmoded political orders and old ways of portraying the world no longer seemed appropriate or applicable; reaction against existing order | • Eclecticism, a tendency toward parody and self-reference, and a relativism that knows no ultimate truth; no distinctions between "good" and "bad" |
| • Classification of the world; order; hierarchy | • The way we understand the world is relative; it depends on our culture, position, class, gender, age, time period, beliefs, etc. |
| • Mastery and progress Historical development; past affects present and future. Universalizing Linear (like a novel) Works of art, science are windows to the truth. | • "Localizing", pluralizing Non-linear (like the Web) Works of art, science are only texts, can only be understood in themselves. |
| **COMPUTERS** | |
| • PCs/UNIX/command line environments Stand-alone mainframe computers CULTURE OF CALCULATION | • Macintosh/Windows; Internet/WWW Computer networks CULTURE OF SIMULATION |
| • Hierarchy, | • Subverted order, decentralized control, |

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| order, centralized control. | fragmentation. |
| **CULTURE** | |
| • High culture vs. low culture -- strictly divided; Only high culture deserves to be studied, analyzed | • Everything's "popular" culture -- it all deserves to be studied; pluralizing Commodification of culture -- everything can be bought or sold |
| • Humans are self-governing and free to choose their own direction | • People are the product of their culture and only imagine they are self-governing. |
| • reality can be discovered through science and can be expressed abstractly (equations) | • "the transformation of reality into images" (Britney Spears is not a person but an image; Nike is not about shoes but about an image, etc.) |
| • Mass culture, mass consumption, mass marketing. | • Demassified culture; niche products and marketing, smaller group identities. |
| **STYLE** | |
| | • Pastiche and parody of multiple styles: old forms of "content" become mere "styles" |
| | • "in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles... (retro, bell bottoms, resurect old styles periodically because there is nothing else new-- we can only remix what's been done.) |
| | • stylistic masks, image styles, without present content: the meaning is in the mimicry |
| | • postmodern attempts to provide illusions of individualism (ads for jeans, cars, etc.) through images that define possible subject positions or create desired positions (being the one who's cool, hip, sexy, desirable, sophisticated...). |

| SYMBOLISM | |
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| • Symbols & meaning: hammer and sickle = world communism | • Symbols drained of meaning: hammer and sickle in advertising (e.g., beer commercials) |
| **ARCHITECTURE** | |
| • "Form follows function"; Le Corbusier, "machine aesthetic"; Mies van der Rohe; International style (eg, airports): straight, clean lines | • Multiple, historical refs.; "playful" mix of styles, past and present. Las Vegas, Pompidou Center; Venturi, Robert Stirling |
| **BODY** | |
| • Clear dichotomy between organic and inorganic, human and machine | • cyborgian mixing of organic and inorganic, human and machine and electronic |
| **POLITICS** | |
| • Big ideas/big, centralized political parties rule | • Fragmented ideas, decentralized power; "micro-politics": interest groups rule (minority factions, NRA, business groups); Foucault, "everyone has a little power" TV politics -- clash of images: "how will it play on the six o'clock news?" |
| • Door-to-door politics; big rallies | • "Late capitalism" rules |
| • Capitalism vs. communism: clash of ideologies "The Making of the President" Parody: "Dr. Strangelove"; Orwell's Animal Farm | • "The Selling of the President" Pastiche: Wag The Dog |
| **IDENTITY** | |
| • Sense of unified, centered self; "individualism," unified identity. | • Sense of fragmentation and decentered self; multiple, conflicting identities. |

| ARTS | |
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| • Artist is creator rather than preserver of culture Impressionism, Cubism, abstract expressionism, suprematism (Malevich's "Black Square") "Photograph never lies" -- photos and video are windows/mirrors of reality | • Artist plays with different styles; aesthetics; pastiche all-important Pop Art, Dada, montage |
| • Art fights capitalism | • Photoshop: photos and video can be altered completely; montage (where's the reality?) Art is consumed by capitalism |
| • Art as unique object and finished work authenticated by artist and validated by agreed upon standards. | • Art as process, performance, production, intertextuality. Art as recycling of culture authenticated by audience and validated in subcultures sharing identity with the artist. |
| • Art as one unique object created by a master artist.<br><br>Analog media: quality deteriorates the farther removed a copy is from the original | • Art as copies (Andy Warhol's Factory)<br><br>Digital media: there is no distinction between an original and a copy |
| • Seriousness of intention and purpose, middle-class earnestness. | • Play, irony, challenge to official seriousness, subversion of earnestness. |
| • Sense of clear generic boundaries and wholeness (art, music, and literature). | • Hybridity, promiscuous genres, recombinant culture, intertextuality, pastiche. |
| FICTION/LITERATURE | |
| • Novel is the dominant form; movies Author determines meaning; the "canon"; of great works: Shakespeare, Kafka, Joyce, Some can tell "good" from "bad" -- art critics important | • TV, WWW; Meaning is indeterminate. Thomas Pynchon, Cathy Acker, William Gibson. Rise in importance of "popular" culture; we can't tell good from bad; it's all relative |
| • Interpretation of a text; there is an ultimate meaning hidden inside | • Non-interpretation of a text; there is no ultimate meaning, instead meaning emerges from what the audience |

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| master literature | brings to the text |
| • the book as sufficient bearer of the word; the library as system for printed knowledge | • hypermedia as transcendence of physical limits of print media; the Web or Net as information system |

| **MEDIA** | |
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| • Knowledge mastery, attempts to embrace a totality.<br><br>The encyclopedia. | • Navigation, information management, just-in-time knowledge.<br><br>The Web. |
| • Broadcast media, centralized one-to-many communications. | • Interactive, client-server, distributed, many- to-many media (the Net and Web). |
| • Centering/centeredness, centralized knowledge. | • Dispersal, dissemination, networked, distributed knowledge |

| **MUSIC** | |
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| • Mozart, Beethoven, Schoenberg Idea of creating an artistic "piece" continued through to rock'n'roll era. | • "World music"; Djs mixing of styles Sampling John Cage, David Byrne |

| **KEYWORDS** | |
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| depth | surface |
| optimism | cynicism |
| analog | digital |
| linear | multi-pathed |
| control-design | chance |
| cause-effect | synchronicity |
| logical | spiritual |
| centered | dispersed |
| uniformity | diversity |
| hierarchical | anarchical |
| authoritarian | democratic |
| patriarchy | non-patriarchy; feminism |
| monism | pluralism |

*A note on the use of the term "postmodern"

- after modernism (subsumes, assumes, extends the modern or tendencies already present in modernism, not necessarily in strict chronological succession)

- contra modernism (subverting, resisting, opposing, or countering features of modernism)

- equivalent to "late capitalism" (post-industrial, consumerist, and multi- and trans-national capitalism)

- the historical era following the modern (an historical time-period marker)

- artistic and stylistic ecclecticism (hybridization of forms and genres, mixing styles of different cultures or time periods, de- and re-contextualizing styles in architecture, visual arts, literature)

- "global village" phenomena: globalization of cultures, races, images, capital, products ("information age" redefinition of nation-state identities, which were the foundation of the modern era; dissemination of images and information across national boundaries, a sense of erosion or breakdown of national, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural identities; a sense of a global mixing of cultures on a scale unknown to pre-information era societies)

http://nmc.loyola.edu/intro/postmod/table.htm#