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RICHARD APPIGNANESI
WITH • ZIAUDDIN SARDAR • PATRICK CURRY

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Introducing Postmodernism

“Brilliantly wide-ranging”

SUNDAY TIMES

“A perfect match of form and content”

TIMES EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT

What on earth is postmodernism? Here, at last, is the perfect audio guide to the maddeningly enigmatic concept that has been used to describe our cultural condition in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Postmodernism claims that ‘modernity’, which grew from the Enlightenment of the 18th century through the Industrial Revolution and on to Marxism, has collapsed, its great project of human liberation suffocated under its own contradictions. For some, this is a good thing, a liberation from a repressive and authoritarian culture; for others, it is an abdication of responsibility that shows how far we have declined.

In 1979, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard famously described the postmodern condition as a crisis in authority. For him, the so-called ‘grand narratives’ or ‘meta-narratives’ of modernity, such as Marxism and liberal humanism, had been

discarded as overly dictatorial. ‘I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives’, said Lyotard. And we can see this incredulity as a profound scepticism, not just in the rarefied world of academic thinking, but in our everyday lives as well. Respect for and trust in authority – politicians, corporations, royalty, the church – is at an all-time low, in the West at least. Are we really in the throes of ‘credicide’ – the death of belief?

With modernity undermined by postmodern ideas, we now live in an endlessly ‘contemporary’ culture, a virtual world of ‘hyperreality’ containing such strange phenomena as post-Holocaust amnesia, Disneyland, cyberspace and the much-vaunted ‘end of history’. But even with the fall of Communism and the apparent triumph of liberal democracy, history has refused to end, and we now inhabit a globalised world of international

terrorism and environmental breakdown. Will 'reality' force postmodern ideas to adapt, or does postmodern theory already allow for this 'brave new world'?

Does 'postmodern' accurately sum up the way we live now? Or is it just a fashionable term that leaves us unenlightened about our true historical condition? Postmodernism identifies itself by something it isn't. It isn't modern any more. But how is it *post*, exactly?

Is it the *result* of modernism?

Is it the *aftermath* of modernism?

Is it the *afterbirth* of modernism?

Is it the *development* of modernism?

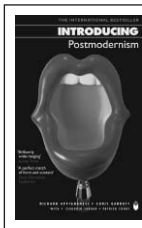
Is it the *denial* of modernism?

Is it the *rejection* of modernism?

'Postmodern' has been used with some or all of these meanings. And the weird logic of becoming postmodern is suggested by the Latin origin of 'modern', *modo*, meaning 'just now'. Postmodern therefore literally means 'after just now'. But if we try to pin down exactly what postmodern ideas are all about, we enter a hall of mirrors, a snarled cat's-cradle of dissenting views, which is one reason why a rational consensus on postmodernism is impossible.

Perhaps it is easier here to say what postmodernism is *not*. It is not *anti-modernism*, that call for an end to experimentation in art and architecture so loudly paraded in the popular media and by people like Prince Charles. So it is not populist conservatism. Nor is it merely an eclectic, mix-and-match approach in which kitsch and retro combine and 'anything goes', while the old aesthetic criteria are ditched and money becomes the only yardstick. This is simply *junk postmodernism*.

If there is a 'real' postmodernism, it needs to be identified in all of the many fields of culture in turn, and this is exactly what Richard Appignanesi does here. As author of the bestselling book *Introducing Postmodernism*, he takes the listener on a roller-coaster ride through the key areas of postmodern debate in art, philosophy, architecture, literature, science, anthropology, sociology, and much else besides. Along the way, he explains the essentials of structuralism, semiotics and deconstruction as developed by Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard and others. This is a crucial guide for anyone wanting to understand the kaleidoscope of competing perspectives that is postmodernism.



Introducing Postmodernism

by Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt is published by
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