

Postmodernism – a beginner's guide



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 postmodernism a beginner's guide kevin hart For Gail Ward post modernism:
 a beginner's guide

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 178 173 bibliography index of names index of subjects overview chapter one
 – postmodernism: some guides We begin by going on a tour in which some
 leading ? gures of postmodernism are introduced: Jean-Francois Lyotard,
 Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Michel
 Foucault. Some important distinctions are made: postmodernism is

distinguished from modernism, then from postmodernity, and finally from post-structuralism.

Three other important words are discussed: posthumanist, post-metaphysical and avant garde. chapter two – the loss of origin Try as one might postmodernism cannot be reduced to a viewpoint or even a small collection of viewpoints. However, it can be clarified by examining three widely held theories: anti-essentialism, anti-realism and anti-foundationalism. Each of these is discussed, and the last one is treated in detail. Arguments against firm foundations in knowledge go back to the ancient Greeks, though postmodernists take their bearings from the declaration of Friedrich Nietzsche's madman, 'God is dead'.

What this means, and how it relates to nihilism and perspectivism, is discussed. Derrida's anti-foundationalism is contrasted with Richard Rorty's. Yet anti-foundationalism is hardly the preserve of 'postmodern' thinkers, as they are usually grouped: it is also an important part of analytic philosophy. Brief introductions are made to Wilfred Sellars, Willard van Orman Quine and Donald Davidson. Why do we think of the European anti-foundationalists as postmodern, and not the Americans? vi overview vii chapter three – postmodern experience Do we postmoderns have different experiences from those that our parents and grandparents had?

Or does postmodernity tell us something new and distinctive about experience? Talk about the postmodern begins by an appeal to experience, while experience is a theme of postmodern talk. Maurice Blanchot is taken as a guide to 'experience' in postmodern times, and particular attention is

given to his notion of the experience of the outside. Many postmodernists have learned from Blanchot, especially from his idea of living an event as image. Baudrillard is one, as his notion of the hyper-real suggests. His treatment of the 1991 Gulf War is considered.

In some respects the world of tele-technology and digital information is a world at the end of history. The idea is considered by way of Derrida's reading of Marx, Kojève and Fukuyama. chapter four – the fragmentary The Romantics were drawn to the fragment; and postmodernists, who distance themselves from Romanticism, affirm the fragmentary. The notion of the fragmentary is introduced by way of Walter Benjamin and Jewish mysticism, and then clarified by Blanchot. Postmodernists often object to totality or unity, but what exactly is their objection to it? The ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, who values infinity over totality, are introduced, and the notion of 'relation without relation' explained. Luce Irigaray's work on sexual difference is considered. Is Christianity related to unity, as Blanchot suggests? Or can it be thought by way of the fragmentary? chapter five – the postmodern bible Does postmodernism reject the Bible, the bastion of unity and transcendent truth, or does it reinterpret it to its own ends? Whether the Bible forms a whole, or even a grand narrative, is considered. The idea of a 'postmodern Bible' is assessed, and is followed by a discussion of Harold Bloom's understanding of J.

What does the Bible bequeath us? Dialogue, Blanchot insists; and a discussion of this claim leads us to consider the prayer 'Come' to the Messiah. It is here that postmodernism: a beginner's guide something that intrigues Derrida, whose biblical interpretations are briefly analyzed, and <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-a-beginners-guide/>

whose views on theology are introduced. chapter six – postmodern religion
Religion in postmodern times is distinguished from postmodern religion. On the one hand, fundamentalism is the postmodern interpretation of religion and, on the other hand, postmodern religion elaborates itself by way of one or more liberalisms.

In Christianity today we might distinguish a/theology and radical orthodoxy. Somewhere between these extremes we can discern a deconstruction of Christianity. Various understandings of this are considered, and special attention is given to Derrida's take on 'negative theology' and prayer. Is Derrida right to ? gure the other person as other than me in each and every way, and therefore to be akin to God? Special attention is given to Derrida's reading of Abraham's sacri? ce of Isaac, and to his notion of 'religion without religion'. chapter seven – the gift: a debate

Is postmodernity secular or does the postmodern render possible a critique of secularism? The question alerts us, once again, to the plurality at the heart of postmodernity. George Lindbeck's postliberal theology is brie? y considered, along with Hans Urs von Balthasar's understanding of theology at the end of modernity and Karl Rahner's mysticism of everyday life. Two thinkers who look to von Balthasar are then discussed in detail: Jean-Luc Marion and John Milbank, and they are examined in the light of their analysis of a theme that is at the forefront of contemporary debate in postmodernism: the gift. onclusion – guides and another guide Other possible topics in postmodernism are raised, including psychoanalysis and politics. Critical realism and eco-criticism are ? agged as important challenges to postmodernism. author's note This book is an introduction to <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-a-beginners-guide/>

postmodernism for people who know little or nothing about it. Special interest is taken in the questions of how religion stands in the postmodern world and how postmodernism stands before religion. In the spirit of the series of which it is a part, I have not quoted any author or supplied any endnotes.

I regard this primer as a contribution to teaching, not research, and I wrote it as though imagining I was giving a series of general talks to undergraduates and other interested people. When you have finished reading the book, make a photocopy of the bibliography and then give the book to a friend. If these chapters have any value, it will be in leading you to read works by the people whose ideas I introduce and sometimes parry. Figures important to the study, contemporary or otherwise, have their years of birth and (if need be) death placed after their names when first mentioned.

Writers who enter the discussion more frequently are identified with the title of a book. Other figures, whose names are used solely to indicate a cultural movement, are not given dates. The dates of an individual or a title are repeated later, in another chapter, only if they bear on a question being discussed. Whenever a book is cited, the year in brackets after the title indicates its date of original publication, whether in English or another language. I would like to thank my research assistant, Brooke Cameron, for providing materials and for checking all that I have written.

Lou Del Fra, CSC, and Shannon Gayk read the entire typescript, and conversations with them clarified many points. Discussions with ix x
postmodernism: a beginner's guide Frank Fisher, Kate Rigby and Regina

Schwartz sharpened my thinking at several junctures, and conversations with Cyril O'Regan invariably cast large circles of light on many things. Henry Wein? eld read an entire draft and made many valuable comments: I am indebted to him. My wife, Rita Hart, listened to me talk over parts of the book and then read the whole: greater love hath no woman.

The Religion and Literature discussion group at the University of Notre Dame generously devoted a seminar to a draft of the ? nal chapter: I have pro? ted from their questions. Jacques Derrida and John Milbank kindly shared their most recent writings with me. Although I wrote this primer without making any quotations, except from the King James Bible, I took pains to make sure that I distorted no one's views, and I would like to thank Romana Huk for helping me locate a remark by Charles Olson and Theresa Sanders for passing on information about the removal of three hundred crosses at Auschwitz in May 1999.

Victoria Roddam invited me to write this primer when I was Visiting Professor of Christian Philosophy at Villanova University in the Fall of 2001. My thanks to her, not least of all for her patience in awaiting the ? nal typescript, and to the Department of Philosophy at Villanova for making my stay so pleasant while I started to think about what I might write. I drafted the book in my second semester at my new intellectual home, the University of Notre Dame. It is a profound pleasure to acknowledge the warm support of my colleagues and students in the Departments of English and Theology.

Finally, I am indebted to my new research assistants, Tommy Davis and J. P. Shortall, for their help in checking the proofs. chapter one postmodernism:

some guides To offer oneself as a guide minimally presumes that one knows the locality sufficiently well to be of help to someone unfamiliar with it. An expert can show a novice around modern philosophy or differential calculus or eighteenth-century British literature without worrying all that much about whether it is even possible to perform the task.

After all, people more or less agree that there is something called 'modern philosophy', for example, even if they disagree whether it begins with John Locke (1632–1704) or Rene Descartes (1596–1650), and even if they argue whether it has been done more effectively in recent years in continental Europe or in Britain and the United States. Those very disagreements are the sort of thing to which a thorough and responsible guide would alert us. Yet in presenting oneself as a guide to postmodernism there is reason to doubt whether the task can be done.

For people do not agree about what postmodernism is, where to go to see its main sights, or even if one can distinguish its central features from others that are less significant. Several people hailed as central figures in the postmodern landscape reject the label of 'postmodern' in no uncertain terms. Some postmodernists tell us that there is no fixed landscape any more, and after listening to them for long enough we might come to think that their own thoughts and words do not form a stable terrain either. And yet there is no shortage of people offering to take you on a tour. 1 2
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As it happens, here comes a guide. He is wearing a badge with vertical stripes of blue, white and red, and printed over them: Les tours de

postmodernisme. It seems promising. After all, you've heard that postmodernism is a thoroughly French thing, and so you sign up without delay. The tour will take place in a lecture theater, you are told, and will introduce you to various thinkers and writers. One name has already been written on the board, JeanFrancois Lyotard (1925–98), and underneath it is the title of one of his books, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, originally published in French in 1979. It was Lyotard' – the lecturer has begun, speaking in excellent English with only a whiff of a French accent – ' who made a generation attend to the word " postmodern". Of course, the word itself had been used before. It can be found as far back as the 1870s, and perhaps some of you Americans have read Bernard Iddings Bell's book *Postmodernism and Other Essays*? No? Well, it was published in Milwaukee in 1926, and indicated a new kind of religious believer, someone not taken with liberal theology. But as we say in France, *les choses ont change*, things have changed, and the word now means something else. So let us return to Lyotard. The postmodern, he argued, was an attitude of suspicion towards the modern. Why? Because the modern always appeals to a " meta-narrative" of some kind, something that overarches all human activities and serves to guide them: the natural primacy of human consciousness, the fair distribution of wealth in society, and the steady march of moral progress. To be postmodern is to distrust the claim that we can attain enlightenment or peace by the judicious use of reason, that we can become happy or prosperous, that any of our higher goals can be achieved if only we wait and work, work and wait. He clears his throat. ' If the modern designates the era of emancipation and knowledge, consensus and totalities, then the postmodern marks an attitude of disbelief

towards the modern. It is not – I repeat not – an epoch that comes after the modern. For Lyotard, the postmodern is what is most radical and irritating in the modern, what offends the canons of good taste: it insists on presenting what we cannot conceptualize, what we cannot find in our experience. 'But I am not a guide to Lyotard,' the lecturer says with a faint smile. I work for Les cours de postmodernisme, and so I wish to show you the towering figures of postmodernism. To do such a thing would scandalize true postmodernists' (again, he smiles) 'since they mock the monumental. They would think I'm merely pulling a stunt. Then again, a "true postmodernist" is a contradiction in postmodernism: some guides use 3 terms, since no postmodernist is entirely comfortable with inherited notions of "truth". No, I'm not tricking you – it's the truth!' And he smiles again, this time for a second longer, before turning around to face the blackboard.

Jacques Lacan (1901–81): that is the name he writes on the board, and no sooner has he started to tell you about Lacan – his famous seminars at the Hopital Sainte-Anne and then at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, his views on Sigmund Freud and what he drew from philosophers from Plato to Martin Heidegger, his extraordinary reading of a story by Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Purloined Letter' – you are puzzled. Is he a psychoanalyst, a philosopher, or an unusual sort of literary critic? Your guide suggests he is all three in one, and your pen is moving quickly as the lecturer scribbles on the board.

It seems that Lacan's main concern is the self or what philosophers, reflecting on the theory of subjectivity since Descartes, have called 'the subject', and his theme is how this subject is organized and disorganized by language. We might think that language enriches the self, giving it a greater

understanding of the world and its places there, but Lacan sees things quite differently: language impoverishes the subject, strips it of being and meaning. The guide draws two intersecting circles on the board. One is called 'being' and the other 'meaning'. The point of intersection,' he says, 'is the place of the subject: it is the site of two lacks, being and meaning. Lacan wants us to see the subject as the space of desire.' It turns out, though, that desire is not a raw yearning for any particular object or person in the world. No, it is a longing that has been shaped by metaphor. 'Yes, metaphor,' your guide insists, "'X is Y". And not only metaphor but also metonymy, "X is contiguous with Y and takes on some or all of its attributes". You'd like an example?

Okay: "a walking stick" is a metonymy (the stick is not walking, you are, but with its help), "a boiling kettle" (the kettle is not boiling: the water next to the metal is). Get the idea? Good. Now for Lacan the subject stands beside a fragment of what is longed for. 'So the subject is motivated by a desire for something not quite symbolic and not quite real: the full-grown man does not want his mother's breast again but unconsciously desires the enjoyment that the maternal breast suggests. 'Of course,' the guide says, smiling ruefully, 'the subject can never be satisfied; we always miss what we aim for, and besides we are always changing and consequently desiring other objects. 'No sooner have you started to grasp how the Lacanian subject turns on those two venerable literary figures, metaphor and metonymy, than your guide is heading elsewhere. Another name is 4 postmodernism: a beginner's guide now on the board: Jacques Derrida (1930-). 'He started as a brilliant scholar of phenomenology, the approach to philosophizing devised by

Edmund Husserl,' the guide declares, ' and has created a massive body of work, ranging from Plato to Jean-Luc Nancy.

As it happens, he wrote a complex and devastating essay on Lacan called "Le facteur de la verite" (1975) which, like many of Derrida's titles, is impossible to translate: it can mean "the postman of truth" or "the factor of truth", and both are important in the essay. ' Derrida has mainly been concerned to show that philosophical concepts are not restricted to philosophical texts: they can be found operating in economics and literature, art criticism and politics, psychoanalysis and theology, pedagogy and architecture. He believes that Western thought has always sought firm grounds – Being, God, the Subject, Truth, the Will, even Speech – but that the quest for these grounds can never arrest the play of textual meaning. Those grounds are always figured as moments of presence: God is absolutely pure selfpresence, for instance. ' The guide pauses and writes a list of texts by Derrida on the board: Speech and Phenomena, Of Grammatology, Margins of Philosophy, Glas ... ' One of my favorite essays by him is "Des tours de Babel" (1985). How to translate that?

Well, "On Towers of Babel" or equally "Some Towers of Babel" or perhaps "Turns of Babel" or even "Tricks of Babel",' he says, smiling again. ' He reads the old story in Genesis and turns it into an allegory of deconstruction. So he tells us how the Shem tribe wants to make a name for itself by building a tower that will reach all the way to heaven. The Shem want to spread their language over the universe, make everything translatable into their terms. Yahweh, Lord of the Universe, will have none of it, and imposes his own name on the tower, "Babel", and thereby upsets their project.

The proper name – Voltaire thought it came from the Babylonian word for “Father” – is heard by the Shem in their language as a common noun, “confusion”, and as it happens Yahweh confuses them linguistically: the consequence of their pride is an irruption of different languages. The Shem cannot translate “Babel” because it is a proper name, yet Yahweh requires them to translate it and, in doing so, he creates confusion among them. ‘If you like, you could say,’ and here the guide pauses for effect, ‘that Yahweh deconstructs the tower that the Shem want to build.

He shows that they cannot render all of reality clearly and without loss into their own language, that the tower is a thoroughly human construction, like all others, and that because it is incomplete and unable postmodernism: some guides 5 to be completed we can inspect it and see how it has been put together. Derrida condenses much of his teaching into one elegant French expression, plus d’une langue, which without a context to ? x its meaning can signify both “more than one language” and “no more of one language”.

There is no higher language to which we can appeal that will resolve all differences and render everything ? nally clear to us. We always have to translate, from one language to another, or within the one language, from one idiom to another. We always translate and we always have had to: there never has been an original language or an original text that preceded our endless work of translation. ‘So that’s what deconstruction is, you think, and now you are smiling with the guide. Derrida is an astonishingly good reader’ – the lecturer continues – ‘he can show those contemporaries who think they have abandoned or surpassed philosophy that they maintain a relation with <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-a-beginners-guide/>

a ground of some sort, while the commanding philosophers of the past – Plato and Hegel, in particular – offer us opportunities to develop new ways of thinking. The essay he wrote on Lacan that I mentioned a moment or two ago, “Le facteur de la verite”, demonstrated that the psychoanalyst was entangled in metaphysics when he believed himself to be quite free of it. He looks around and sees a few puzzled faces, including yours. “Metaphysics”? Well, you are right to be puzzled. There are various definitions of the word, and it's easy to get confused. The word comes from the Greek *meta ta physica*, meaning what comes after physics. The word became associated with some highly influential lectures by Aristotle (384–322 bce), now gathered together and called the *Metaphysics*; they came after his lectures on nature called the *Physics*.

Long after Aristotle, people thought of the topics the philosopher considered – things like the nature of being, cause, unity, numbers – as removed from nature, so metaphysics became associated with the supersensuous, namely, that which is above or beyond what our sense experience can register. I can experience this piece of chalk' (and he dangles a long, white stick before you), 'but I cannot experience the essence of the chalk. Postmodernists tend to use the word “metaphysics” more generally than do readers of the *Metaphysics*.

They follow the meaning that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) gave to the word. *Metaphysics*, he thought, asks the question “What are beings?” but fails to ask the more fundamental question “What is being?” Because it doesn't ask that question, it figures being by way of beings, and so we think of being as a firm ground like God or Mind. ' 6

postmodernism: a beginner's guide That said, he moves on. ' Derrida can also show us how to read literary texts more closely and more fully than we are used to doing without doing anything like conventional literary criticism.

Prose writers like Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) and James Joyce (1882–1941), and poets like Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98) and Paul Celan (1920–70), fold philosophical motifs in strange ways in their work and give us opportunities to rethink the concepts we have inherited. ' You are about to ask for an example, but it is already too late. Your guide is now talking about open networks of micropowers, rhizomatics, and the free flow of desire. The names on the board are Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and Félix Guattari (1930–92), the one a philosopher and the other a writer on anti-psychiatry.

They became friends and wrote several books together. Two are especially important, it appears: *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

' Lacan wanted to return to the early Freud, but Deleuze and Guattari set themselves against the preoccupation with the subject that they found in Freud. Desire, they say, does not arise from the subject but is flowing everywhere; in fact, the subject is an effect of desire. There is no original desire for the mother to be satisfied, only a generalized flux of desire that is now formed this way and now that way. ' All that is rather a lot to take in, you think to yourself, yet the lecturer is still in full flight. ' The really bold position adopted by Deleuze and Guattari,' he says, ' is the claim that experience is not maintained in the consciousness of a subject. They are radical empiricists, true heirs of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76), and they argue that there is no ground of experience, whether in the mind or outside it. ' What does all that mean?

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Luckily, the guide has anticipated your perplexity. ‘ If Deleuze and Guattari are right,’ he says, ‘ we have to rethink experience and all that goes along with it, especially perception and consciousness, and recognize that the human has no exclusive right to them. That’s why A Thousand Plateaux discusses desiring machines and genes, evokes “ becoming animal” and “ the body without organs”. The book points us beyond humanism. ‘ In his own way, Michel Foucault does the same,’ he adds, then remembers to write his dates on the board: 1926–84.

Now here’s a name you’ve heard before. You’ve heard that he analyzes the relations between power and knowledge, and now you are taking notes, as best you can, about how his notion of archeology differs from the postmodernism: some guides 7 usual practice of history. ‘ Where historians attend to continuities and try to set discontinuities within a larger framework of development or evolution, an archeologist like Foucault has no interest in smoothing out the past but prefers to concern himself with rifts, ruptures and contradictions. The concept ‘ man’ itself is a fairly recent invention, it appears, and if you understand your guide correctly Foucault thinks its time is more or less over. Sovereign man, subject and object of knowledge: he arrived on the scene, according to Foucault, only a few centuries ago, and his demise has been heralded in the narratives of Franz Kafka, Maurice Blanchot and Pierre Klossowski, among others. ‘ In his later work’ – the lecturer continues, and by now your hand is getting tired from taking so many notes – ‘ Foucault tried to think outside the realm of the subject. He argued that power is everywhere: it is not concentrated in individuals and is not limited to social classes but abides in structures and systems. You can

resist power, but you can never get outside it. ’ The guide is just about to write more names on the board, for there seems to be no end of them, when a bell strikes the hour, and the lecture is over. As you say farewell to your guide you murmur to yourself the names you have already heard, as well as several others you jotted down along the way: Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva ...

Overhearing you, another guide comes over and says, ‘ But that’s not postmodernism, that’s just more high culture – worse, elite academic culture. Besides, postmodernism started in the United States and at first had nothing French about it at all. Lyotard merely made postmodernism respectable to professors of English and Philosophy by hitching it to post-structuralism. ’ He pauses, and you can now take in his badge. It is in American red, white and blue: Popular PoMo Tours, it says, and it has a stylish reproduction of the ‘ Nike’ logo underneath. The word “ postmodern” was coined by American writers and architects in the late 1940s and early 1950s,’ he goes on. ‘ They wanted to signal that they were doing something different, something more risky, than what their modernist moms and dads were doing. But of course it’s taken off in all sorts of directions since then, and if you want to find out about it you’d do better to look around Las Vegas than Paris. Here, let me show you the real thing,’ he says, ‘ free of charge. It’s my lunch break, after all.

Come on, this is my favorite cafe in the mall. ’ And before you can say a word he is already on-line. His laptop screens several video-clips of Madonna

8 postmodernism: a beginner’s guide (‘ See how she perpetually remakes herself ? There is no authentic self to be discovered’) and some footage from <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-a-beginners-guide/>

the Gulf War ('What really happened in operation "Desert Storm" was the film of it broadcast on CNN'). Then he points out Philip Johnson's AT Corporate Headquarters in New York ('See how it cites Roman and Neo-Classical features?

See its Chippendale pediment? Johnson makes a pastiche of the architectural past'), an advertisement for Coke ('The image is what you really consume'), Mark Tansey's canvas 'Myth of Depth' ('The man walking on the water is Jackson Pollock, and he is calling representation into question, and, with it, presence and, if you think about it, the Christian God as well'), and then runs a sequence from the movie Blade Runner (1982), before talking about it in conjunction with the book on which it is based, Philip K. Dick's pulp science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). Hardly a surprise, he lauds an essay by an American, Donna Haraway: 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1989). Then he slips into some French names, and keeps going back to two in particular, Jean Baudrillard (1929-) and Roland Barthes (1915-80) ... 'I thought you said that those French scholars don't give a proper sense of postmodernism,' you object. 'You miss the point,' your new guide says. 'Postmodernism takes what it likes from high culture and puts it to work in popular culture.'

Besides, Barthes and Baudrillard never bought into philosophy as a' – and here his face turns sour – 'master discourse.' 'So you mean that postmodernism is to do with taking things out of their contexts, fragmenting them, focusing on surfaces rather than depths, and, well, playing with them?' 'Ah, now you are getting the idea,' says your new guide, and leans back deeply in his chair. 'It's about collage and pastiche, parody and irony. It's

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the triumph of the visual image over written text,’ he says, and slowly strokes his laptop as he speaks. And it’s the triumph of data and simulation over nature,’ he whispers, as though to himself. You are about to ask him about that when, just behind him, a woman puts down her glass and turns around. Clearly irritated, she says, ‘ I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong impression that postmodernism is only about popular culture. Your friend here’ – she looks sharply at him – ‘ seems to think that only popular culture has benefited from the rejection of overly rigid distinctions between popular and high culture.

Some of the really exciting literature of our time begins by doing just that, though. The first powerful works of postmodernism: some guides 9 postmodernism are James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable* (1953). Oh, to be sure, they divide the border separating high art from the everyday, but you can’t tell me that they were written to be part of “ obsolescent lit”. The postmodern never completely abandoned the modern, and that’s a good thing. Think of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) or Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985).

The very books I’ve been teaching this morning, as it happens’ – she points to Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night, a Traveler* (1979) and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980) on the table before her – ‘ couldn’t have been written without making reference to high culture. Take Eco’s novel,’ she says; ‘ on the one level it is a quite conventional detective novel while on another level it is a sophisticated allegory of intertextuality, a reflection on how all books refer endlessly to other books. That way of combining the high and the low is called “ double coding”. With her Mont Blanc fountain pen ?

rmly in hand, the woman who has just been talking is now starting to make what, from the intensity of her gaze, might well turn out to be a long list of other postmodern writers you should read – Walter Abish, John Ashbery, Donald Barthelme, Susan Howe, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Patrick Suskind ... – when she too is interrupted. Clearly annoyed by what he has overheard, a young man twists round and says, ' The postmodern isn't something that happens just in Departments of English or Comp. Lit. , although perhaps it would be better were it con? ned there. He trains his aim steadily on the woman, and then turns to the man still sitting beside you. ' And this fetishism of popular culture isn't the postmodern, either – you're taking the effect for the thing itself, if there is just the one thing, which is very doubtful. What you all need to realize is that postmodernity is a complex reaction to the terrible failures of modernity. Do I really need to list them? The Holocaust, the Gulag, the ecological disaster that's destroying our children's futures even as we speak, and the sheer destitution of millions of starving people in the third world. ' The failures of modernity! ' splutters the defender of literature. ' Hold on a minute. Let me remind you of Jurgen Habermas's essay " Modernity – An Un? nished Project". It's been around for, like, twenty years! Besides, as I was just saying, it's a big mistake to think that the postmodern is a stark rejection of the modern or an advance over it. And I was about to say that it's another big mistake to think of people like Einstein and Freud as moderns pure and simple since they are the ones who unknowingly set in motion the decentered 0 postmodernism: a beginner's guide and groundless world of post-modernity. ' But the young man doesn't have the slightest intention of letting himself be interrupted for very long. ' Oh yes, I know all that stuff about modernity not being completed, and that

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we have a duty still to be enlightened and rational, brushing our teeth and all that. But I want to tell you something different from what those Frankfurt School people say. ' He takes a testing sip of the steaming cafe latte just set down before him, then launches into what everyone feels will be a harangue. We all know that nation states are far less powerful than before the Second World War: economics has gone global, and the world economy is increasingly based on consumption instead of production. We live in a world of images. At first this brave new world of hyper-reality and mass media, credit and contingency, seems exciting, though I assure you it isn't much fun for the poor who live for the most part in countries burdened with debt accumulated from the first world. And behind the effervescence there is insecurity and fear. Is it a coincidence that the most popular sites on the Internet are either pornographic or religious?

It's one thing to strip away the illusions of modernity, quite another to know how to live without them or, worse, to live with what they have spawned. With the loss of imperial power, you gain small, angry states; and with the rise of American internationalism, you gain international terrorism. What's important about the postmodern is that it allows us to live without the illusions that modernity dangled before us – that, if we were reasonable and worked hard, we might all be free and prosperous and happy. But that doesn't mean we should spend all our time pondering ads for Nike or reading self-referential novels. We should all be doing something to help those people excluded by the culture of Coke and Cleverness. ' He looks at his watch, finishes his coffee with one swallow, and nods farewell. He has a lecture to give. As it happens, all three guides leave together, in a quiet conversation;

and you are left with other names swirling in your mind: Homi Bhabha, Zygmunt Bauman, Terry Eagleton, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson ... ' He's far from wrong,' says a young woman sitting behind you, ' although he really should distinguish the postmodern as an historical epoch from the postmodern as an ensemble of styles.

And he should acknowledge that there are some politically engaged postmodernists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as well as radical black postmodernists, like Cornel West. ' You turn around, and note that she is wearing an unusual badge: postmodernism: some guides 11 P O M O A POST-SECULAR ALTERNATIVE T O U R S P T Y L T D ' He left just when he was getting to some really interesting issues: the postmodern as a re-enchantment of the world, as a new opportunity for thinking ethics and – I don't know if he would have gotten around to this – a fresh way of approaching the mystery of God. ' I don't think he was heading in that direction,' you say. ' No, I fear not,' she concedes, ' and I don't think that woman was either: she cited Einstein and Freud but didn't even think to mention Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the last century, who also argued that we have no foundations in this world and who pointed us beyond humanism. Anyway, let me ? If you in on what he wouldn't have said. I've got a full minute before my next tour. ' You laugh together, and she leans towards you and starts speaking quickly. ' Modernity was haunted by the deus absconditus, the God who withdrew from the world, and put universal reason in his place.

But with the end of modernity we glimpse the end of the hubris that there can be a universal reason created and cared for by men and women. The

postmodern is the site of the post-secular; it’s an opportunity for people to develop critiques of modernity and its brash rejection of the divine.

Postmodernists are right: there are no fixed essences, only a differential flux. They are mistaken, though, when they think that this implies there can be no values, no meaning, nothing at all, or, worse, that it suggests a world of perpetual assertions and counter-assertions of the will to power.

They think in that way because they are in the lingering grip of the 12 postmodernism: a beginner’s guide modern and its fascination with abstractionism, secularism and nihilism. We can think that flux differently, as a consequence of God creating the world out of nothing. And we can think theology as a discourse that promotes peace simply because, unlike all the secular disciplines, it lays no claim to mastery. ‘ ‘ Boy, theologians must have changed,’ you say, smiling. ‘ The ones I’ve heard over the years lay claim to mastery unlimited, and they hardly promote peace! Ever heard of odium theologicum, hatred among theologians? She doesn’t rise to the bait, so you change track and go on. ‘ The guide I hired this morning told me that God performed the first deconstruction when he imposed his name on the Tower of Babel,’ you say. ‘ But before I came this morning I’d heard that Derrida was a nihilist. ‘ ‘ Sounds like you signed up for Les tours de postmodernisme,’ she says. ‘ Say, do their guides still make those awful puns on “ tour”?’ ‘ Not that I noticed. ‘ ‘ Oh good; that’s an improvement. But let’s go back to your question. Some postmodern Christians think Derrida is a nihilist,’ she says, ‘ although I’m not at all convinced they are right.

If you read Derrida well, you can see that he is not attacking the Judeo-Christian God; if anything, he is pointing out that God does not have to be ?

gured as the ground of reality – the first being, the highest being, the being of being – no, God can be God without having to be an unmoved mover or whatever. In fact, Derrida is opening the way to develop a sophisticated non-metaphysical theology, one that offers a sustained rejection of idolatry. It might even enable us to rethink our positive theologies, including the doctrines of the Christ and the Trinity, and make them more genuinely theological. ' You mean that Derrida is a theologian? ' ' No, no: not at all. He's not a believer himself, and his interests are otherwise; but since his critical object is metaphysics, not theology, he looks on with considerable interest to see how deconstruction might work in theology ... Of course, some people think that deconstruction does not direct us to re-elaborate the central doctrines of Christianity but to entrench the death of God. And there are still others who argue that a deconstructive theology is best approached as a quest for justice, that it reveals a general structure of messianicity. ' ' Can you explain that last word? ' Sorry, got to run,' she says. ' My next tour is just about to start. You can come along, if you like. ' But you've had quite enough. Somewhat giddy, you write down the names of those she has just mentioned: John Caputo, Kevin Hart, Jean-Luc Marion, John Milbank, Merold Westphal, Mark C. Taylor, Edith postmodernism: some guides 13

Wyschograd ... It's been a long day, and you go home and cannot get to sleep until late. *** ' What on earth happened yesterday? ' You've woken up, and you have a terrible headache from talking with all those guides. ' What is postmodernism, really? ' you ask yourself. Did all those guides describe the one phenomenon from different angles, or did they tell me about separate things? And – wait a minute – who on earth are you? And how did you get in? ' Hi. I'm the author, and you bought my book the other day. So

that's how come I'm in your house. Nice place, too. I overheard your questions, and perhaps I can help you, though my answer is bound to be unsatisfactory. Overall, those guides did both: they described postmodernism and described entirely different things. 'How can that be?' It's quite possible because none of your guides took the trouble to draw some fundamental distinctions.

I won't promise that once you have those distinctions in place all of postmodernism will become clear to you. It won't. But you will be in a far better position to learn more about it. 'Aren't you biased, though?' I remember that one of the guides, right at the end, said that you were one of those people involved with postmodern theology; and I'm not at all sure that I can trust someone who has an axe to grind. 'It's true: I have contributed a little to postmodern theology, but to know where I stand might make it easier for you to judge my remarks.'

Besides, you are hardly likely to trust a meta-guide to postmodernism, are you, especially after what you were told yesterday? Postmodernists tend to ask 'D'où parlez-vous?', 'Where do you speak from?', and it is a good question. So I should tell you, right at the start, that I'm far from being a wholehearted advocate of postmodernism. I admire Derrida, although you should be aware that he repudiates the label 'postmodernist'. He thinks it marks a historical division between a modern and a postmodern era, and quite rightly he doesn't credit that sort of rupture. And I admire Levinas and Marion, among others.

Are they postmodernists in any important sense of the word? It's debatable. More, though, I enjoy some of those writers who seemed to be in the background of your guide's remarks: Samuel Beckett and Maurice Blanchot, Paul Celan and John Ashbery. Are they postmodern? Well, yes and no. The word 14 postmodernism: a beginner's guide ' postmodern' might help bring some of their concerns into focus, once we begin to understand it, but it surely won't illuminate everything about them. I'll have something to say about that later. Before then, though, let me distinguish a few elements.

You might want to make yourself some coffee while I talk. And, please, do put some clothes on. 1. First of all, we need to be aware that the word ' postmodernism' can mean different things in different contexts, and the most important context is the word to which it refers: ' modernism'. So what is modernism? Usually, the word signifies a brew of cultural phenomena that became quite heady in the first twenty or thirty years of the last century. We can indicate it with some names: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, Henri Matisse and Le Corbusier.

In the Christian religion, though, ' modernism' means something quite different. Theological modernism also started to gain energy around the turn of the twentieth century. Its proponents – Friedrich von Hugel, Alfred Loisy and George Tyrell, among others – ran several lines: that religion is at heart a matter of experience, even feeling; that religious impulses are ultimately unconscious and reason is alien to them; that doctrine is at best a symbolic representation of spiritual needs, at worst a dead hand on religious life, and that it changes over time.

Both modernisms can be seen as movements in a larger historical epoch called modernity that started in the seventeenth century, if you trust the philosophical time line, or the sixteenth century, if you prefer the literary time line. From now on, 'modernism' will denote cultural modernism, and I will specifically talk of 'theological modernism' if I need to do so. In fact, though, I won't be doing that for some time, let alone talking about 'theological postmodernism'. We've got quite enough on our plate for the moment, don't you think? 2. Now we have to draw a line, if we can, between postmodernism and postmodernity.

Let's begin with a placing shot: postmodernism is an open set of approaches, attitudes and styles to art and culture that started by questioning or exceeding or fooling with one or more aspects of modernism. The blurry group of ideas we call postmodernism started to come into focus in the 1950s and 60s in America. Irving Howe talked, rather disparagingly, of postmodernist writers in 1959. Unlike the modernists, they had no critical edge, he thought. Leslie Fiedler gave a talk at Rutgers University in June 1965 which he entitled 'The New Mutants', and in that lecture postmodernism: some guides 15 e evoked something he dubbed 'post-Modernist literature', and spoke of it with more enthusiasm than Howe had done. Fiedler had in mind authors such as John Barth, Anthony Burgess, William Burroughs, William Golding, Harry Matthews and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Anyone who had read Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) would have realized that the author was poking fun at realistic narrative, while admirers of Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* (1959) would have picked up that he was

using collage in preference to linear narration. The word ' postmodern' had been used even before Howe and Fiedler, though.

They could have quoted Randall Jarrell's review of Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*. That collection of poems appeared in 1946, and it was around that time that some architects started to use the word. Later, it was much used when talking about ideas and buildings by Philip Johnson and Michael Graves, James Stirling and Robert Venturi. Nowadays it's not much used in architecture, despite the efforts of Peter Eisenman. Most people today would think of Lowell's early poetry as late modernist instead of postmodernist, and admirers of postmodern poetry would point to John Ashbery or Emmanuel Hocquard or Lyn Hejinian as favored exemplars.

In these writers one finds an attention to surfaces rather than depths, an affirmation of the everyday rather than a commitment to high seriousness, discontinuities rather than unities, and a thoroughly decentered subjectivity. Pastiche and irony, collage and non-functional form: all these were beginning to color American artistic counter-cultures in the late 1950s and the 1960s. As the sixties gave way to the seventies those different threads started to be tied together by literary critics working in the United States – Ihab Hassan and William S. S.

Spanos are two prominent names – and before long they found their way to France. There Lyotard, Baudrillard and others retied them, adding some local threads, and only a little while later the value-added product was imported by American colleges and universities and then exported from America and France all over the Englishspeaking world. There were three main local

threads used by the French. The first was a rejection of foundations or origins that are held to be given naturally, inevitably or universally.

The second was a rejection of realism, namely, the thesis that language, when used properly, can tell us the truth about reality. And the third was a rejection of humanism: man, considered as the subject and object of knowledge, is no longer held to be sovereign but is regarded as an effect of desires or discourses or power systems. 16 postmodernism: a beginner's guide And so postmodernism was spread across the globe. Having left America as experimental art, it came back as high theory; and teachers and students in a thousand cities started to read that same experimental art through the newly ground lenses of theory.

Now postmodernity is commonly taken to denote the historical period in which we live today, what is taken to have succeeded the modern age. Historians with a taste for periodization will sometimes say that the postmodern era started after the Second World War, although you can always find indications of change before then. In the same way, no sooner does someone say that postmodern literature started to emerge in the 1950s than another person will find a literary work from the past that has some, if not all, of the same features: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–65) and Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) are cases in point.

That's the sort of thing Lyotard has in mind when he insists that the postmodern is an attitude, not an age. Yet even if one is dubious about dividing history into periods, each with one or more guiding spirits, one will surely recognize that the world has changed in a distinctive way over the last

half century. By the mid-1950s most American homes had at least one television set: the Cold War was characterized by the domestic entrenchment of visual culture, and by 1989, when the Berlin Wall was dismantled, baby boomers had become at ease with personal computers.

Ten years later they were comfortable with the Internet. That same generation has slowly learned that the nation state, to which so many hopes of the modern era were attached, cannot provide the security that it promised to provide. It is perhaps the only thing in the last few decades that has been slow, for postmodern times are characterized by speed. We live in perpetual acceleration. And yet society has stalled. There is appalling poverty in the United States: in Chicago and Los Angeles, New York and Washington, DC many children cannot find enough to eat.

With the end of post-war prosperity in Europe, America and Australia, the financial market has been deregulated, and those economies that depend on commodities have suffered badly in recent years. There are international companies – Exxon, General Motors and Shell, to name just three – with more buying power than the smaller economies of Europe, Africa and the Pacific Rim; and to whom, if anyone, are the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization ultimately responsible? We have come to live in a world where religious fanaticism has not been quietly postmodernism: some guides are sidelined by rational enlightenment, as was once hoped, but has come to speak loudly from competing political sites. Somehow it has happened that we talk of 'clean war' and use images of the death of innocents as 'infotainment'. That same world is threatened by rogue states with nuclear capacity, not to mention bio- and cyberterrorists. It

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is shocked by the spread of AIDS and not shocked enough by ecological breakdown: the great forests, the planet's lungs, get smaller and smaller each year.

Osama bin Laden's attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 has made the entire world insecure: he did not attack buildings, plain and simple, he targeted symbols. International capitalism and postmodern culture have been in partnership for decades. Yet clearly not all the world enjoys seeing the happy couple parading around the world as if they owned it. Apocalyptic narratives are a familiar part of postmodernity, and some of them, like Y2K, just fizzle out. All these narratives form the background for revivals of the gothic, the gnostic and the pagan. To flick from channel to channel on daytime TV is to encounter angels and vampires, aliens and cyborgs, to be assured of the imminence of the end times by preachers and to have Nostrodamus's predictions seriously discussed by apparently well-educated guests on talk shows. Postmodernity can be construed as what occurred to the world when we stopped trusting in modernity, when order and reason, moral progress and enlightenment, ceased to be high values we held in common. Modernity, we realized, may have filled us with illusions about what humans could achieve, but it also shielded us from many religious and political horrors.

Hitler and Stalin appear as egregious exceptions to a plausible world order only if one has a confirmed trust in the power of human beings everywhere to become more democratic, more rational, and more humane. Yet if postmodernity declares 'less of modernity' it also affirms 'more of modernity'. The postmodern age can give us everything modernity offered, it

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is said, but without its abstractions, its unreachable social ideals and its moralizing. For the postmodernist, there is no one 'modernity'. So we should not say 'more of modernity' but 'more of modernities'.

We can take the bold advances in medical science and digital technology, we can embrace the emancipation of women and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream, and we can keep the constitutions and bills of rights drawn up in the eighteenth century. And we can leave behind everything that seems implausible or utopian, beginning with the welfare state. I dare say the poor will be abandoned 18 postmodernism: a beginner's guide before very long: modernity had a place for the poor – the future, where all would be well – but postmodernity has no such place for them.

If postmodernism attracts many political liberals, postmodernity chimes nicely with the interests of political conservatives. 3. We also need to distinguish postmodernism from poststructuralism. I've already said a few things about that: we've seen that American postmodernism was taken up by the French, reworked in a philosophical vein, and exported back to the United States. The first guide you had the other day, the smooth fellow from *Les tours de postmodernisme*, spent almost all his time talking about post-structuralists, not postmodernists.

To be fair, the two 'isms' have come to penetrate one another, but there are important differences between them nonetheless. The first thing to note is obvious: post-structuralism contains a reference to structuralism, the dominant intellectual discourse in France in the 1950s and early 1960s. Claude Levi-Strauss (1908–) is the father figure of the movement, especially

in the social sciences, although he drew very deeply from the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) who inspired other structuralists such as A. J.

Greimas (1917–92) and Gerard Genette (1930–). It was Saussure who distinguished *langue*, the system of language, from *parole*, the spoken word. The former is social; the latter, individual. And it was Saussure who taught us to separate the diachronic aspect of language, its passage through history, from the synchronic aspect, its invariant structures at any given moment. No speaker is conscious of those structures while uttering sentences, and in the same way, Levi-Strauss thought, other social institutions are governed by rules of which no individual member is conscious. He was especially interested in myths.

Only when we become aware of the social structures of myths, he argued, can we make sense of them; and those structures appear only when we relate all the myths of a given society to one another. All the thinkers now called post-structuralists – principally, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan – maintained a rapport with structuralism, even when they became critical of it and even though their intellectual context may have included ideas and schools foreign to structuralism. Derrida, for instance, emerged as a student of phenomenology; and he attracted attention in his first writings not only by founding a doctrine of signs in Husserl's writings (and submitting it to a stringent deconstruction) but also by exposing and undoing a metaphysics at work in structuralism. postmodernism: some guides 19 All three of the main post-structuralists are French, yet the label itself is American, and I can tell you a story about how this came to be. In October <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-a-beginners-guide/>

1966 a conference was convened at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Its title: 'Critical Languages and the Science of Man'. Its brief: to introduce structuralism to the United States.

Eminent representatives of the new movement spoke at the conference, including Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, and on the last day the young Derrida presented a paper, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'. Among other things, Derrida developed there a close reading of Levi-Strauss that convicted him of a nostalgia for innocence that recalled Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). Structuralism did not last a week in the United States; almost immediately it was overtaken by post-structuralism! Of course, that's not the whole story.

As early as 1956 Paul de Man, who participated in the conference at Johns Hopkins and who became well known as a post-structuralist himself, had argued that formalism was a dead end. And in America Derrida was widely taken to be a structuralist for seven or six years after the conference. That said, the word 'post-structuralism' was coined in the United States, started to circulate there in the mid-late 1960s, and was used to describe diverse intellectual currents in Europe. Sometimes the word is used simply to denote those thinkers who came after the structuralists.

For example, it has been applied to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) who developed a highly original ethics by reworking phenomenology and who never showed the slightest interest in structuralism. Over the decade of the seventies especially, feminists and Marxists tried to rethink their positions by way of post-structuralism and, in

the process, in? ected it in various ways. It must be said that the French themselves have been more concerned with writers who, to Americans, are modernists or late modernists rather than postmodernists.

Stephane Mallarme and Franz Kafka, Raymond Roussel and Lautreamont: these are the names one encounters in the writings of the French poststructuralists, and they are prized there for having the potential to transgress aesthetic and social norms. How ironic then that when post-structuralism started to be in? uential in the United States it came declaring itself to be transgressive but armed with – of all things! – a canon of modernists. It is also ironic that one had to do a lot of homework before one could be transgressive in the desired French manner.

British and American students and teachers were 20 postmodernism: a beginner's guide often unprepared for the range and depth of philosophical reference in the new thought. For the French not only begin studying philosophy in the ? nal year of secondary school, the classe de philosophie, but also have a quite different canon of philosophical texts than is taught in the English-speaking world. Many years of reading the ' master thinkers' – Hegel and Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger – were required before English-speaking admirers of post-structuralism could even contemplate stepping out of line!

Looking back a decade, American postmodern prose and poetry seemed so much more experimental and so much more fun than the texts of philosophy and psychoanalysis that replaced them. In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, it became de rigueur to read those works with reference to French

thinkers who had been yoked together in a violent manner by advocates of this strange new thing, post-structuralism. 4. Two other words are sometimes used in connection with postmodernism, and it's a good idea to be familiar with them. The first is post-humanist.

We've already touched on it. All the guides you talked with the other day stressed that postmodernism is highly skeptical about the subject. For European thinkers philosophical modernity started with Descartes and his emphasis upon consciousness as foundational for our knowledge of the world. Cogito ergo sum, he declared, 'I think, therefore I am.' And this focus on a coherent, unified subject has been an abiding concern of many philosophers since Descartes, most notably Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Edmund Husserl (1859–1938).

It has been said that postmodern thinkers have erased the subject, but no such thing has happened. At most the subject has been resituated with respect to discourse or desire or power. One of the burdens of Blanchot's critical writing has been the loss of the power to say 'I'. On his understanding, there is something older than the cogito: not an act of thought at all but a ceaseless murmur of language without a magnetizing center of consciousness. In quite different ways Derrida and Foucault have been influenced by this idea.

For Derrida, the 'I' is never fully self-present; it always presupposes a relation with its own general absence, namely death. And for Foucault, the priority of the philosophical 'I think' is contested by the 'I speak'. Speech and writing, Foucault maintains, will disperse the 'I' sooner than bring it to a

sharp focus. Technology, not philosophy, is what excites some advocates of post-humanism. There is nothing inevitable about the current biological form of the huma