

What are the characteristics of postmodern aesthetics



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Through an examination of postmodernism theory it can evidently be seen that it is fundamentally an aesthetic that has derived through the cultural movement of modernism. Through the differences between the movements, however, the characteristics of postmodern aesthetics, such as fragmentation of the individual subject, impossibility for originality, pastiche, self reflexivity, appropriation and bricolage, can be clearly distinguished. Through an examination of Baz Luhrmann's film's 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Moulin Rouge' in relation to such aesthetics it will be clearly seen how these works are undeniably postmodern. Postmodernism is a cultural movement which is seen to have evidently emerged in the 1960's. Many theorists believed that modernism had reached its full capability and that there was nothing else that could be achieved and therefore the notion of postmodernism is seen by many as marking the space of an era after modernism. Many postmodern theorists have based their work through the ideas the modernist movement brought forth: "Modernism lurks in its sequel, haunts it.

The very fact that a phenomenon is called 'postmodernism'- that it differs from modernism by nothing more than a prefix- pays tribute to the power of modernism's cultural force field and suggests that postmodernism might be no more (or less) than an aftermath or hiatus" (Gitlin, 1989). As modernism clearly has importance within the cultural movement of the postmodern, and as postmodernism seems intrinsically linked to its predecessor it is therefore imperative to detail the characteristics of the cultural movement that is modernism. Modernism is often seen as intrinsically linked with western thought and values and focused on the idea of a global view of the world,

which was based on the idea of the purity of all mediums and the possibility for universal communication. As modernism is primarily a western notion it is again evident that it is linked with the postmodern which has also been theorized through western beliefs and ideas.

Modernism is a cultural movement based on the idea of a scientific world view, the belief in production, progress and the enlightenment idea. The connection is evident between modernism and postmodernism as its successor is fundamentally linked through theory to the previous movement. Charles Jencks evidently brings forth modernism's stance and advocates its importance within the movement of Postmodernism when he says: "Postmodernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of modernism and its transcendence" (1987, 14). A detailing of the cultural movement that is modernism is thus imperative to the understanding of the nature of postmodernism as the continuance of the former, especially according to Jencks, is undoubtedly connected to the postmodern.

As a movement from which postmodernism is seen to have emerged from, modernism has primarily been based on the idea that there is an expression of the belief of unity and essential meaning. Modernism's fundamental characteristics are the belief in master narratives of history such as progress through the forces of technology and science and the belief in totalizing explanations of history, culture and science which was presented as the only forms of truth and knowledge. Modernism promoted a strong sense of the unified self and advocated a deep faith in the foundation of individuality.

Modernism produced the idea of a clear distinction between high and low
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culture in art forms which enforced the distinguished culture as authoritative and consequently produced a serious purpose, intention and a universal meaning that they believe is produced through texts.

Theorists, in particular Habermas, advocated the idea of modernism as a period that focused on the enlightenment project, science and the golden age of reason. In the C18th, Modernism advocated a greater faith in the future known as the doctrine of progress and in the C19th advocated the quest for perfection and the belief in technological progress through the condition of industrialism (Potts, 2003). Modernism has been a movement formed by Western beliefs and shaped through the inescapability of progress and indestructibility of science. Elements driving the shift from modernism towards the postmodern movement were the breakdown of belief in meta-narratives through the idea that there is no universal agreement of truth, with truth being seen as a cultural construction by postmodernists and an increasing polarization between subjects on issues of morality, truth and culture.

Modernism was typically concerned with the idea of stability and the attempt to construct disorder into the notion of order, an idea which bases itself on the belief in the existence of totality. Lyotard theorizes this notion of totality, for example science as the principal form of knowledge, as fundamentally dependant on grand narratives in modern societies. Postmodernism's focus, however, is the critique and rejection of such Meta narratives that alternatively concentrates on the idea of mini-narratives which make no claims to stability or universality in regard to truth, purpose or reason.

Postmodern is therefore a movement toward fragmentation of the individual
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subject that is disillusioned with the promises of the enlightenment project and advocates social and cultural pluralism. Pluralism is at the core of postmodernism which refers to the existence of multiple styles.

Jencks writes: “ Postmodernism means the end of a single world view, and, by extension, ‘ a war on totality’, a resistance to single explanations, a respect for difference and a celebration of the regional, local and particular” (1987, 11). Jencks clearly demonstrates his opposition to totality and the consequent emergence of a pluralistic society which bases itself primarily on the existence of difference. Postmodernism can be seen as a cultural movement or a plurality of movements based on a crisis of legitimization where the authoritative nature of Meta narratives that the modern movement imposed is now being questioned. Postmodernism interrogates the commanding position previously held by Meta narratives which consequently opens up the space for a plurality of values which has resulted in the fragmentation of society. As pluralism is at the heart of the postmodern Gellner perceptibly writes that: “ it is almost impossible to give a coherent definition or account of postmodernism” (1992, 27).

Therefore, as postmodernism is a movement fundamentally based upon a notion of plurality it would be consequently contradictory to assign the movement a definition. While modern works attempted to expose universal truths which have a purpose and a singular meaning to reach a universal audience, the postmodern consequently aims to embrace multiplicity.

Postmodernism sees individuals as fragmented and instead of detecting a universal truth it instead ‘ plays’ with the material as a performance and focuses on surface rather than the depth of a text. Gitlin writes: “ The work <https://assignbuster.com/what-are-the-characteristics-of-postmodern-aesthetics/>

calls attention to its arbitrariness, constructedness; it interrupts itself.

Instead of a single center, there is pastiche, cultural recombination" (1989, 102).

While the modernist notion placed value on the purpose and meaning derived from the content of a text the postmodern emphasizes style above content and focuses on the surface as a signifier without the need for meaning. As a style, postmodernism focuses on uncertainties in texts and the idea that all previous styles have been exhausted and all that is left is a pastiche of certain styles. Jameson believes that in the postmodern age we are living in a continual present as all ideas and ways of expressing ourselves have been used and artistically we can only rearrange past works while nostalgically looking backwards. He theorizes the idea that there is an impossibility for originality when he says: " in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson, 1983).

Jameson brings forth the element of pastiche which is the notion he describes as exemplifying the imitation of styles. Jameson writes that pastiche is: "... like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter..

. blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor" (1983, 114).

Jameson theorizes that like parody, pastiche is a mimicking of style, but a

dead style which is therefore impossible to parody. Through Jameson's belief in the impossibility of originality it is evident that there is no longer a way to create new styles as all innovative styles have been exhausted and the only possibility is the reinvention of prior styles within present texts. Jameson evidently portrays that all styles have been thought of before when he writes: " There is another sense in which the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds- they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already" (1983, 115).

All possibility for innovative ideas has evaporated and all that is left is to resort to the imitation of dead styles known by Jameson as the idea of pastiche, a notion to him that allows for new ways of expression. Produced from this idea has been a flourishing of characteristics in texts within the postmodern age such as artistic and stylistic eclecticism, a mixture of genres and the amalgamation of different styles from different time periods which has disrupted the modernist binary of high and low culture. Other postmodern characteristics are self reflexivity where a text brings attention to itself as a process of work as opposed to the modernist understanding of a text which was to derive meaning from the content or substance. However, postmodernism instead focuses on play or the signifier instead of the purpose or the element that is signified from a text. The element of appropriation, otherwise known as re-contextualization, is another postmodern characteristic which is implemented within postmodern texts due to Jameson's notion of the impossibility of originality where all that is left is to recycle past styles. Appropriation is the creation of a new work through

the stealing of images and texts from an earlier period and appropriated in a present context.

Another postmodern characteristic is the idea of bricolage which describes the use of bits and pieces of older artifacts to produce a new if not original work of art which blur the traditional distinctions between old and new and the collision of period and contemporary elements. Jameson conveys this idea through postmodernism when he writes of the: "erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so called mass or popular culture" (1983, 112). This idea of bricolage brings forth the blurring of high and popular culture distinctions, divisions which were fundamental to modernism, in particular art works. Baz Luhrmann's film 'Romeo and Juliet' can be seen to be a postmodern text in many ways in particular as it denies originality, is eclectic, uses appropriation, bricolage, is self reflexive, breaks down barriers between high and low culture and places emphasis on the surface rather than the content. The element of Jameson's notion of the impossibility of originality can be evidently seen in the movie as Luhrmann's film is based on the adaptation of Shakespeare's original.

Luhrmann doesn't attempt to make a film that is innovative; rather he places emphasis on Shakespeare's original by adhering to the Elizabethan prose and story line in a contemporary world of cars, MTV and drugs. Luhrmann brings the element of eclecticism into the film by not attempting to be faithful to the original play the way other adaptations have, for example 'Othello' and 'Much Ado About Nothing', but by profoundly re-contextualising the original. Luhrmann morphs the old standards of the original into a contemporary setting which brings the element of bricolage into the remake <https://assignbuster.com/what-are-the-characteristics-of-postmodern-aesthetics/>

by juxtaposing a very old play with popular culture elements such as the use of contemporary music from Radio Head and Garbage. In this way, the film can be seen to break down the distinctions between high and low culture by eclectically bring forth old and new elements and positioning them together.

Through a modern era, Shakespeare's works have been appreciated by the high class; however, Luhrmann purposely uses elements of low culture or popular culture to break down such distinctions. The film also uses the technique of appropriation by not only clearly borrowing elements from the original Shakespeare play but also elements from other Shakespeare works such as Macbeth, Henry V and Hamlet. For example in Luhrmann's adaptation the local cleaner shop is called ' Out, Out Damn Spot Cleaners' and another shop name called ' Mistress Quickly' who is a character from Henry V. The local burger shop is also called ' Rosencratz's Burgers' which is the name of a character from Hamlet.

Luhrmann also appropriates the genre of Spaghetti westerns which is depicted in the service station battle between the Montague's and the Capulet's. This scene is reminiscent of Clint Eastwood in many of his western films in the past especially when Tybalt grates his cigarette on the ground in slow motion while drawing his gun. The element of self reflexivity is also reminiscent in Luhrmann's adaptation which does not attempt to be original but rather highlights its constructed nature as a text. Self reflexivity aims to highlight its constructed nature, as a process of work rather than an innovative masterpiece that texts in the modern age aspire towards.

This sense of self reflexivity may be seen in the beginning of the film which opens with a television screen where a news presenter reads the prologue. The film here is highlighting and commenting on it being constructed and also the film ends in the same way with the anchorwoman reading the final prologue on the television set. This technique works as a way of reminding the viewer that what they are watching is a constructed and produced work which ensures our detachment from viewing the film. This technique therefore makes the viewer aware that what we are watching is a form of reporting just like the daily news. It highlights the fact that we are watching is an interpretation of events that has been manipulated and edited so here the television works as a metaphor for how the film has been constructed in the same way, much like the daily news.

The characteristics of postmodern aesthetics such as appropriation, bricolage and self reflexivity, may also be evidently seen in another of Baz Luhrmann's films 'Moulin Rouge'. Through the film, Luhrmann appropriates past musicals as well as that of popular culture, which is evident through the abundance of pop songs from the past four decades, such as Madonna, the sound of music and Elton John. Moulin Rouge is set in the C19th century and the storyline borrows largely from past musicals such as Verdi's famous opera 'La Traviata'. Jencks notion of double coded comes in here which Potts describes as a way in which the audience can enjoy any text at two levels (2003). One in which they are aware that the film has appropriated past images and styles and the other where viewers who are unaware of the allusions being drawn upon can enjoy the film for what it is and in Moulin's Rouge case this would be a romantic musical.

The element of bricolage is evident within the film as Luhrmann disrupts the traditional C19th musical by recontextualising the text by juxtaposing popular culture elements such as pop music. Also Luhrmann contrasts the C19th musical and C20th music with C21st cinematography in order to eclectically jumble different styles ranging over three centuries and positions them within the same text. In this way, this element can contribute to the erosion of the distinction between high and popular culture as the medium of musical, which is typically considered high culture, for example theatre productions on Broadway, is contrast within kitsch elements of popular culture. The film can also viewed as highly self reflexive which draws attention to the text as a process of work in order to highlight its constructed nature and to consequently deny authenticity.

This can be seen in *Moulin Rouge* which is a musical about the making of a music called 'Spectacular, Spectacular'. In this sense, the film is seen as self reflexive as it constantly reminds the viewer of the constructed nature of the film as a high proportion of the scenes deal with rehearsing for the musical as well as the position of the director and the producer. The postmodern has undoubtedly been produced by theorists who have focused on the movement as a continuation of modernism. Through the examination of the cultural movement that is modernism, the characteristics of postmodernism can be evidently depicted, which appears to work in opposition to its predecessor. Through the examination of the characteristics of postmodern aesthetics it is evident that the film's 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Moulin Rouge' can be clearly seen as postmodern through the elements of appropriation, bricolage, self reflexivity, eclecticism and pastiche.