

Post modernism in pop culture



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Attempts to define post-modernism can come in many different forms as different people have different ideas as to what exactly the term means. This being said, most people who take part in the debate over modernism and postmodernism share a consensus that postmodernism might be many things, but it certainly is linked with the growth of popular culture in the late twentieth century in the West. In other words, postmodernism can be seen as a new historical moment, a new sensibility, or a new cultural style, but popular culture can be referenced as the site on which these changes can be most easily found. Postmodernism is a perspective which tends to reject many of the accepted values of modernism. It involves a reinterpretation of gender roles and the differentiated traditionally applied to them. It takes a more global perspective in its view of ethnic and national distinctions, and rejects stereotypes of all kinds. At the same time, it embraces the notion of nostalgia in art (film, television, advertising) and uses multiple referencing (among other strategies) to communicate on a variety of symbolic levels. This essay will research the nature of postmodernism and apply it to a body of film, television, or advertising material. It should focus on a single example and analyze it as typical of postmodern artistic form. From this essay it will be clear that postmodernism represents a blurring of the boundaries between levels of culture, and *The Simpsons* is a typical example of postmodernist artistic form.

It was the late 1950s and early 1960s that the movement that we now come to know as postmodernism began to emerge. In the words of Susan Sontag, a critic of American culture, it came with the emergence of a “ new

sensibility”, and this involves a blurring of the distinction between “ high” and “ low” culture. Anyway, the distinction becomes less meaningful.

The post-modern new sensibility did not follow along the same lines as the cultural elitism of modernism. Although modernism seems to have an important place in popular culture, it is marked by a significant suspicion of all things popular. It was those items that were associated with elite culture that were accepted under modernism. Culture was that which would be readily accepted into a museum, it was that which had a homologous relationship with the elitism that is inherent in class society. What this means is that the drive towards post modernism in the late 1950s and 1960s was associated with the growing attack on the elitism of modernism. The emergence of postmodernism signaled a refusal of “ the great divide... a discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture,” moreover, “ to a large extent, it is by the distance we have traveled from this great divide between mass culture and modernism that we can measure our own cultural post modernity.”

A good early example of the new wave of post-modern popular culture can be seen in the American and British pop art movement of the 1950s and 1960s as it rejected the division between high culture and popular culture. This can be said to be “ postmodernism’s first cultural flowering.”

One of pop art’s first prominent theorist, Lawrence Alloway explains that “ the area of contact was mass produced urban culture: movies, advertising, science fiction, pop music. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among intellectuals, but accepted it as a fact, discussed it in detail,

and consumed it enthusiastically.” This acceptance of the new movement of postmodernism allowed people to treat popular culture in the realm of serious art, and not a second tier of culture.

When seen from this perspective, postmodernism first came out of a refusal by the different generations to abide by the categorical certainties of high modernism. It came to be thought of as taboo to continue to maintain an absolute distinction between high and popular culture. This was very evident in the way that art and popular music merged. A good example of this can be seen in the way Peter Blake designed the front cover of the Beatles’ Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band and the way Andy Warhol designed the cover of the Rolling Stone’s album Sticky Fingers.

By the middle of the 1980s, the post-modern new sensibility had become deeply engrained into popular culture, and for some, a reason to despair. The postmodern condition is one that is marked by a crisis in the position of knowledge in Western societies. This served to give intellectuals less eminence as the “ academy” continually lost its credibility. Iain Chambers argues this point from a different perspective. He says the debate over postmodernism can in part be understood as “ the symptom of the disruptive ingression of popular culture, its aesthetics and intimate possibilities, into a previously privileged domain. Theory and academic discourses are confronted by the wider, unsystemized, popular networks of cultural production and knowledge. The intellectual’s privilege to explain and distribute knowledge is threatened.”

Another cultural theorist, Angela McRobbie agrees with this as she sees it as “ the coming into being of those whose voices were historically drowned out by the (modernist) metanarratives of mastery, which were in turn both patriarchal and imperialist.” She put forth the argument that postmodernism has enfranchised a new sect of intellectuals who speak from the margins from a perspective of difference, including ethnic, class, gender and sexual preference differences. These are the people whom she refers to as “ the new generation of intellectuals.” A similar point is made by Kobena Mercer as she sees postmodernism as partially an unacknowledged response to the emerging identities and voices of those people who have emerged from the margins, and this opens a new way of seeing and understanding.

Hyperrealism can be said to be a component of postmodernism. In the sphere of the hyperreal, the real and the imaginary continually come into contact with each other. Simulations begin to be experienced as something that is more real than real itself. The evidence in favor of this argument can be seen throughout our Western society. For example, we live in a society where people write letters to the characters they see on television, asking them out on dates, and offering them places to live. This can be called the dissolution of television into life, or the dissolution of life into television.

It was said by John Fiske that postmodern media does not, like it once did, “ provide secondary representations of reality: they affect and produce the reality that they mediate.” Additionally, Fiske argues that those events in our lives that ‘ matter’ must be synonymous with media events. The arrest of O. J. Simpson was a good example of this. As the news of his story unfolded, people in the area rushed to his house so that they could be part of the news

cycle. They wanted to be indistinguishably live people and media people. This is an attribute of the postmodern era. These people were aware that the media was not merely reporting of circulating the news, they were creating it. Therefore, if people wanted to be part of the news of this event, it was not sufficient to be there on the scene, to actually be part of this event, they had to be on television. This is a testament to the fact that in the hyperreal world of the postmodern, the distinction between a real event and its media representation loses its distinction.

Frederic James who is an American critic of culture as is well versed in postmodernism argues that it is a culture of pastiche. To him, postmodern culture is “ a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.” Postmodernism is a culture that is put together from many different places it can be said to be “ a culture of quotations.” Our cultural production is the consequence of other cultural production. “ Postmodern cultural texts do not just quote other cultures, other historical moments, they randomly cannibalize them to the point where any sense of critical or historical distance ceases to exist – there is only pastiche.”

This trend of the pastiche is noticeable in both the body of film and television. It can be seen in the ‘ nostalgia film’ that is evident in both television and film. Some movies that would fall into this category of the postmodern nostalgia film would be Back to the Future as it seeks to recreate the atmosphere and stylistic peculiarities of America in the 1950s. Other films like Raiders of the Lost Ark, Robin Hood and Lord of the Rings act

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in a similar way as they induce a sense of narrative certainties of the past. In this way, “ the nostalgia film either recaptures and represents certain styles of viewing the past.” These films seek to make cultural myths and stereotypes about the past. They offer “ false realism: films about other films, representations of other representations.”

As this study of postmodernism in popular culture progresses, it is useful to apply it to a single example, and then analyze it as typical of postmodernist artistic form. The Simpsons is a spectacularly popular show of the last two decades and it represented the first prime time animated series since the Flintstones. Since its inception, this show has emerged as a cultural phenomenon. It is because of this immense success that The Simpsons represents a worthy object of study for cultural critics.

There is no doubt that this television series can be placed in the category of the postmodern. All of the rhetorical devices that are synonymous with postmodern theory are present in The Simpsons: pastiche, quotation, intertextuality and reflexivity. The Simpsons, because of the way it uses reflexivity and intertextuality in particular is a great example of the postmodern at work.

All elements of this show are related to a network of intertextual references to popular texts of other. In particular there are four ways in which The Simpsons uses intertextuality in recurrent forms. Firstly, there are single elements in the show that carry many intertextual references. A good example of this is the fact that the name of the town that The Simpsons live in is called Springfield. This is significant because it is the same name as the

town that the vintage television show *Father Knows Best* was set in. This might be a rather obvious reference to the nostalgic, but there are much more subtle references in the show that make it surely a postmodern creation. For example, the curator of Springfield's museum is named after a couple of dormitories at Harvard University. Also they build on nostalgic phrases on the past, "two cars in every garage, and three eyes on every fish." In this way *The Simpsons* can be said to be a collection of quotations.

Many of the scenes from *The Simpsons* are also taken from other movies or television shows. There is that episode that includes "22 Short Films about Springfield," and this in particular serves as a parody of *Pulp Fiction*, another important creation in the postmodern milieu. In fact, there are whole episodes of *The Simpsons* that are entire parodies of other shows. For example, the episode "Bart of Darkness" is a parody of Alfred Hitchcock, and there are even echoes of Jimmy Stewart in "Itchy and Scratchy Land." Additionally, the show is one that heavily displays internal references. This builds on the fact that each episode is at its outset freestanding. Even though the main characters do not evolve, they possess a memory of past episodes and the supporting characters do change.

The Simpsons can also be said to be postmodern because of the way that it is an example of reflexive television, one in which the text is a reference to its condition of consumption and production. This can be seen in four ways. First, *The Simpsons* can be seen to be reflexive from an examination of the opening credits where the family rushes home to crowd the couch and watch television. This highlights the fact that the show is about the process of watching television, and television consumption is a necessary component of

family life. The Simpsons also possesses a commentary on the star system. In one way, the show contains a television universe where television stars are created. One such example is Krusty the Clown whose purpose is to fulfill the ongoing process of consumption and merchandizing. In another way, real stars make cameo appearances on the show giving their voices characters that either represent themselves or other figures. The show can even serve as a parody of the animation industry within the animation industry. There is an episode where the ratings of the new “ Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show” has poor ratings. This episode is interesting because it highlights a caricature of a market research process which utilizes the pulse meter for assessing how new characters are received when they are seen by the audiences for the first time. This is a great example of how The Simpsons is reflexive television.

The Simpsons can even refer to what has been dubbed postmodern hyperconscious. It is a type of commentary on the role that they play in popular culture. An example of this comes when Homer is enjoying a night out and Apu asks Homer if he is on television as he looks familiar. Homer says, “ sorry buddy, you got me confused with Fred Flintstone.” This is reflexive in that it shows that the series’ creators are aware of the links between their show and their predecessors.

These are just some of the many examples that make The Simpsons a great example of postmodern culture, although their use of these rhetorical devices is systematic. What is the reason for this show's particular approach, meaning that unlike the other cartoons on television, The Simpsons is very unique? This is because the show is not intended to attract the same

audiences as other cartoons, it provide a social commentary and is thus attractive to the sophisticated public. The Simpsons actually works in an interesting way as its form serves to encourage the consumption of popular culture. The show uses postmodern strategies to make political and social commentary in a way that is non partisan and in a way that is appealing to the masses. The creators of the show clearly do not want to create divisions among its audiences.

In this paper it has been shown that attempts to define postmodernism can be a difficult task, but there are simple ways to explain it. One thing for sure though is that postmodernism is linked with the growth of popular culture in the late twentieth century in the West. Postmodernism is a perspective which tends to reject many of the accepted values of modernism. It involves a reinterpretation of gender roles and the differenced traditionally applied to them. It takes a more global perspective in its view of ethnic and national distinctions, and rejects stereotypes of all kinds. At the same time, it embraces the notion of nostalgia in art (film, television, advertising) and uses multiple referencing (among other strategies) to communicate on a variety of symbolic levels. It was then shown that The Simpsons is a perfect example of postmodern pop culture as it is nostalgic and reflexive, and also uses rhetorical devices which are common in postmodernism. From this essay it is clear that postmodernism represents a blurring of the boundaries between levels of culture, and The Simpsons is a typical example of postmodernist artistic form.