

# Mailing 3: **Paradigm Shift**

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## Modernism to Postmodernism

“It is only the modern that ever becomes old-fashioned.” - Oscar Wilde

### Trajectory Construction

This essay is an analysis comparing modernism with postmodernism. These two successive historical periods are considered along with their associated dominant philosophies that have dramatically influenced western thought, understanding, and art theory. A complication associated with this undertaking is the broad meaning ascribed to each of these terms.

Conditions denoted by both expressions involve a wide spectrum of tendencies, pathways, and influences in literature and art, as well as in philosophical position.<sup>1</sup> The basis for comparison thus is limited to several core concepts pertinent to

art theory. After a general introduction to each paradigm, the following topics are specifically addressed: the grand narrative, truth/reality/reason, progress, and art for art's sake. This approach has the advantage of targeting specific concerns with a goal of amplified understanding of creative effort in the context of two significant worldviews.

### Modernism

Modernism is the dominant philosophy of the modern era, which spans about 110 years starting from the industrial age in the 1860's until the late 1970's.<sup>2</sup> A famous flow chart (Figure 1) made by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the founder and first director of

The Museum of Modern Art, gives a sense of the evolution of modern art as an interconnected

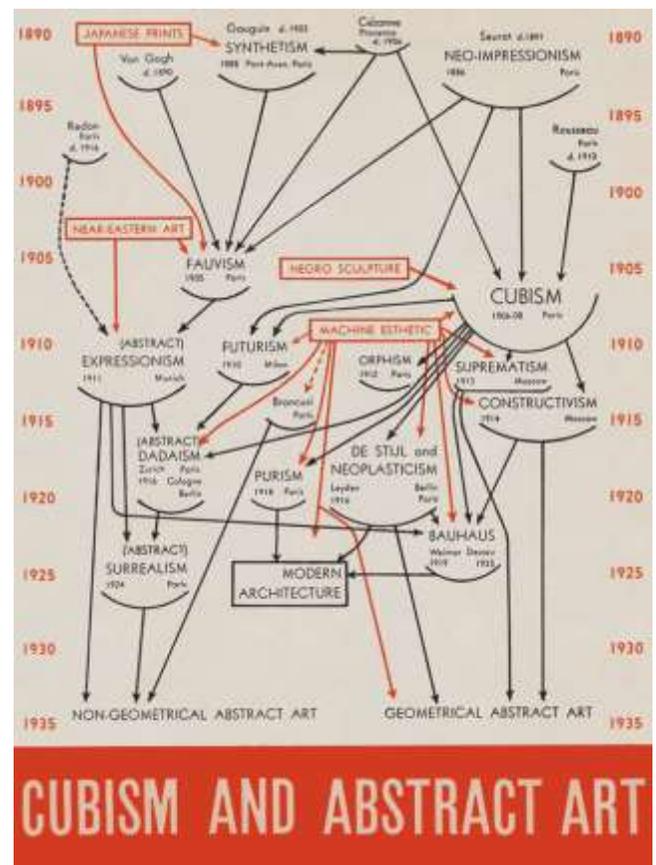


Figure 1 Cubism and Abstract Art, Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

system, and itself now seems a very modernistic instrument. Modernism prized ideas of freedom, absolute truth, uniqueness, and progress, while responding to major cultural changes such as urbanization and industrialization. A common thread was a aspiration to create a new style of art that reflected these changes, often couched largely in formalistic and stylistic terms. Discarded were ideas of tradition and history, along with older vernacular<sup>3</sup> and decorative art styles.<sup>4</sup> International in spirit, modernist art perhaps above all embraced an incessant need for originality. This need for originality was most evident with the avant-garde, a term associated with practitioners occupying the forefront of a developing culture that privileged the innovative, the cutting-edge, and the fresh.<sup>5</sup> The artistic avant-garde dreamed of an innovative world free from greed, conflict, and social inequality.<sup>6</sup> The modernist belief in freedom of expression manifested itself in art through choice in subject matter, style, and technique. The following significant quote from Christopher Wilk's book, Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914-1939, helps to bring this era into focus:

**Modernists had a utopian desire to create a better world. They believed in technology as the key means to achieve social improvement and in the machine as a symbol of that aspiration. All of these principles were frequently combined with social and political beliefs (largely left-leaning) which held that design and art could, and should, transform society.<sup>7</sup>**

The autonomous human, endowed with reason and equipped with the scientific method, became the measure of all things. Modern artists experimented with perception and approaches to creative materials and artistic function. A propensity toward increasing abstraction exemplifies much modern art.<sup>8</sup> Modernism attempted to juggle science, psychology, ethics, philosophy, and art, looking to find either novel or hidden meaning in the human experience.

## **Postmodernism**

Modernist thought metamorphosing into postmodernist thought is a paradigm shift, where “one conceptual world view is replaced by another.”<sup>9</sup> In general, postmodernists are fundamentally opposed to modernist ideas. As Brian Wallis stated in his essay “What's Wrong With This Picture?,” the “central purpose of art and art criticism since the early 1960s has been the

dismantling of the monolithic myth of modernism and the dissolution of its oppressive progression of great ideas and great masters.”<sup>10</sup> So although it is impossible to pinpoint the beginning and the end of any era precisely, from the 1970’s onward the term postmodernism came to describe increasing apparent changes in society and the arts. From philosophical French developments in thinking, a new focus on language and the interpretation of texts emerged, with a belief that modernism had failed to provide solutions. Gilles Deleuze,<sup>11</sup> Pierre-Félix Guattari,<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida,<sup>13</sup> Jean-François Lyotard,<sup>14</sup> Jean Baudrillard,<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault,<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva,<sup>17</sup> and many others helped formulate postmodernist thinking.<sup>18</sup> They began to deliver a message incorporating a concurrence of incompatible elements, relativism, and even pessimism with recognition of human corruption. Therefore, spirituality comes back as a comforting possibility, while simultaneously organized religion is suspect.<sup>19</sup> People replace absolute truth with qualified truth, seeking meaning and relationships while being skeptical and cynical. The postmodern is by design elusive as a concept, attributed to its inclusive acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity.

In art an interest in mixing artistic styles developed, with a blurring of sharp boundaries between reality and illusion. Devaluing the original as appropriation gains favor, an added factor of irony and/or profound meaning becomes important. This meaning takes form as a radical political statement, a deconstruction of historical narratives, or a socio-economic critique. Interpretation of artistic intent comes through a semiotic<sup>20</sup> analysis of differences and oppositions that structure plausible cultural significance of artwork. If modernism desired to express the new, by contrast postmodernism is a mirror broken into many fragments, reflecting the dysfunctional. Barbara Kruger is a postmodern artist that uses found halftone photographs extracted from mainstream print magazines that sell the very ideas she is disputing. She layers these images with text interrogating power and struggle, commenting on society. Her work “You are Yourself,” (Figure

2) is an excellent visualization of the postmodern position.

Key components are complexity and contradiction, resisting authority, while being paradoxically entwined in the culture system that it resists.<sup>21</sup>

**“Where modernism frequently attacked commercial mass culture, claiming from its superior perspective to know what was best for people; postmodernism enters into a complicitous relationship with the dominant culture. In postmodernism, modernism’s hierarchical distinctions between worthwhile ‘high’ culture and trashy ‘low’ culture collapse and the two become equal possibilities on a level field.”<sup>22</sup>**

Whereas modernism was concerned with reasoned progress and logical conclusions, postmodernism emphasizes the creative process. Thus, the final art object becomes secondary, incidental, and often temporary. By confronting

their own pretensions and promoting processes of consciousness, the postmodern artist is reflexive through

acute self-awareness. Judith Butler's use of the concept of “performativity,” for example, significantly addresses postmodern reflexivity.<sup>23</sup> Her position in this context is that the daily behavior (or performance) of individuals is based on social norms or habits. By personally transforming these social norms, we may break identity limitations. Along similar lines of reasoning, Michel de Certeau’s book The Practice of Everyday Life,<sup>24</sup> examines how all aspects of mass culture are assimilated and individualized, and suggests defensive tactics available to counteract the pervasive forces of commerce, politics, and mass-communication.

## **Grand Narrative**

Modern artists desired to overcome tradition while creating original work in the context of a grand narrative of art and cultural history. They thought that for art to be effective, it must be as widely understood as possible. However, this goal was not simply a matter of composing



Figure 2 You are Yourself, Barbra Kruger

representational images; it also demanded finding the “*true art*” residing within the image. Art can be many things and take many divergent forms. Nevertheless, something common but unique differentiates art from non-art. Just like the scientific “truth” of the Enlightenment, the “truth” of modern art was universal. All fine art obviously must possess this hard-to-pin-down universality.

This basic universality is also known as a meta-narrative. The core idea is an abstract theory can be developed that acts as a comprehensive explanation of experience or knowledge. Much literature of modernist thought is attributed to structural functionalism,<sup>25</sup> sometimes referred to as totalizing theory. Theorists such as Émile Durkheim,<sup>26</sup> Niklas Luhmann,<sup>27</sup> and Talcott Parson,<sup>28</sup> all supported this notion. Modernist behavior thus focused on totalizing theory in search for an all-encompassing hypothesis of society and social development. Some discoverable foundation must exist.<sup>29</sup>

In support of the grand narrative, artists went in search for the “truth” or essence of art, carried out using pictorial reasoning. One favored approach was to strip away distracting elements such as recognizable elements that tended to conceal the universal art essence,



Figure 3 *Composition VII*, Wassily Kandinsky

leading to pictorial abstraction. An example of this approach would be the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky who, in his 1913 painting “*Composition VII*,” (Figure 3) reduced his compositions to arrangements of colors, lines, and shapes. He believed colors, lines, and shapes could exist autonomously in a painting without any connection to recognizable objects.<sup>30</sup> A more drastic approach was to reduce the non-recognizable to the most basic colors, lines, and

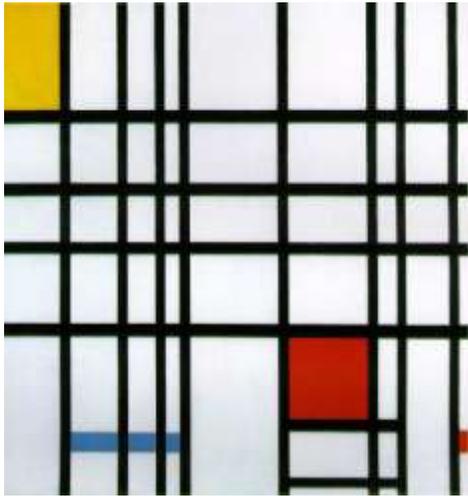


Figure 4 Composition with Yellow, Blue, and Red, Piet Mondrian

rectilinear shapes, as realized by Dutch painter Piet Mondrian in his “Composition with Yellow, Blue, and Red” (Figure 4).

In direct opposition, postmodernism deeply distrusts meta-narratives, as expressed by the prominent French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard.

Well known for his influential articulation of

postmodernism and its impact, in “The Postmodern Condition:

A Report on Knowledge,” he proposes an extreme generalization of the postmodern as an “incredulity towards meta-narratives”.<sup>31</sup> “Let us wage a war on totality,” Lyotard proclaimed, just as other postmodern philosophers began to emphasize that the time of reliance on such grand narratives as Positivism, Communism, Capitalism, and Religion had passed. They declared that all-encompassing schemes offering comprehensive explanations do not exist. Instead, there are only fragmented and contradictory lesser narratives of diverse individuals and societies. All is difference, they assert, privileging disorder rather than order. Instability is the more “natural” state, thus placing a premium on flux, nonlinear change, chance, spontaneity, indeterminacy, irony, and orderly disorder. There are no absolutes; many truths replace one truth and all judgments are postponed. The meta-narratives and the grand ideals have vanished. Of course, postmodern skepticism toward meta-narratives is itself a grand narrative.<sup>32</sup>

### **Truth/Reality/Reason**

The model of establishing absolute hypotheses from which all other facts can be explained by linear, deductive logic relentlessly guided modern truth. Mary Klages provided a helpful listing of some of these humanist notions in her introduction to postmodernism:<sup>33</sup>

- 1. There is a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal—no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates.**
- 2. This self knows itself and the world through reason, or rationality, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form.**

3. The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is "science," which can provide universal truths about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.
4. The knowledge produced by science is "truth," and is eternal.
5. The knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead toward progress and perfection. All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.
6. Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true, and therefore of what is right, and what is good (what is legal and what is ethical). Freedom consists of obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.
7. In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right (and the beautiful); there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right (etc.).
8. Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. Science is neutral and objective; scientists, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased rational capacities, must be free to follow the laws of reason, and not be motivated by other concerns (such as money or power).
9. Language, or the mode of expression used in producing and disseminating knowledge, must be rational also. To be rational, language must be transparent; it must function only to represent the real/perceivable world which the rational mind observes. There must be a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them (between signifier and signified).

These fundamental humanism principles serving to explain and rationalize social configuration and drive artistic production were fully adopted by modernism.

Postmodernists take a much different position, viewing knowledge as always partial, conditional, and fragmented, (Barthes, Lyotard, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida). There are no absolutes because we all have our own private truths.<sup>34</sup> Communities and cultures each have their own framework, which to a large degree are linguistically structured.<sup>35</sup> Their discourse and belief composition does not necessarily relate to any one particular reality. As Guy Ernest Debord said, "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."<sup>36</sup> Everything is subjective, relative, uncertain, dependent, and ambiguous. Postmodern works of art invite individual interpretations and personal narratives engaging responsive awareness, rather than defending absolutes.<sup>37</sup> Nothing we can say or do is truly "original."<sup>38</sup> Even artists who create something ostensibly revolutionary still are synthesizing, referencing other preexisting work, and making an associative connection. Reality and representation overlap. Postmodernism emphasizes the way images and symbols shift or lose

their meaning. Andy Warhol's (Figure 5) work predicted symbolic ambiguity, expressed in his quote “. . . a group of painters have come to the common conclusion that the most banal and even vulgar trappings of modern civilization can, when transposed to canvas, become Art.”<sup>39</sup>



Figure 5 Campbell's Soup Cans, Andy Warhol

## Progress

Enlightenment theorists postulated that rational thought, linked to scientific reasoning, would inevitably evolve towards moral, social, and ethical progress. This expectation of a better society is a dominant position also embraced by modernism.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, standing at the progressive end of the modern journey, was Utopia (Figure 6). This optimistic concept anticipated development of an ideal civilization possessing a perfect socio-politico-legal system free from all ills.



Figure 6 Power for Progress <sup>41</sup>

The postmodern advocate does not believe in the fundamental modernist tenet of continuous progress toward a better human society, that everything will become better and better. The idea of progress is largely abandoned; in its place is dystopia.<sup>42</sup> The postmodernist considers that many problems result from technology run amuck, and concludes that science is neither a solution nor an unconditional blessing. In fact, humankind's application of the science method has demonstrated its capability to destroy as much as to improve. Progress is not a forward and upward trajectory. Since modernism already rejected tradition and the past, and now with future progress no longer the goal of postmodern effort, many artists ironically address the present and focus on contemporary popular culture.

### **Art for Art's Sake**

Exercising artistic freedom became essential to progressive modernism. Artists began to seek freedom from both artistic tradition and from communal expectations. In this vein, art must

possess its own intrinsic characteristic not necessarily designed to satisfy any extraneous, utilitarian, or moral function. In modernism, abstraction grows to be privileged over the representational, with a sense of inherent, recognizable qualities that distinguish art from non-art. Famously promoted in the influential review L'Artiste, the progressive French novelist and critic Théophile Gautier championed the idea that art should be autonomous, and promoted the slogan “l'art pour l'art.” Thus, art should be produced free from the restrictive demands of meaning and purpose.

Art for art's sake became an accepted perception of popular culture, exemplified by the Latin version of the phrase, “*Ars gratia artis*,” used as a slogan by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in branding their motion pictures (Figure 7). In his book, The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, the progressive modernist painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler proposed, “Art should be independent of all

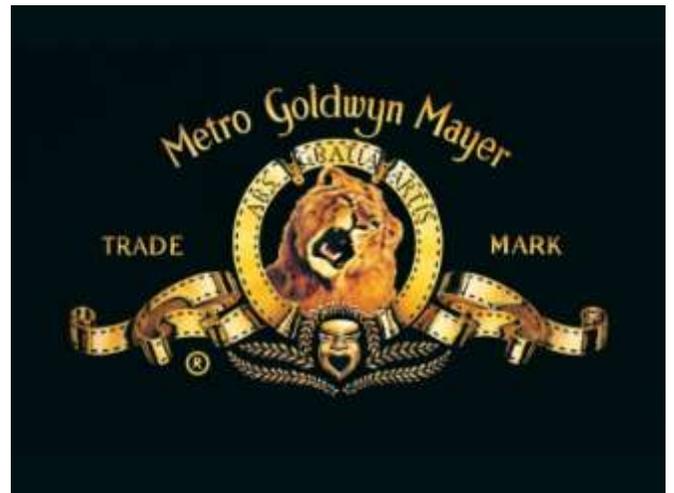


Figure 7 Logo for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

claptrap – should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye and ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it.”<sup>43</sup>

Eventually there emerged the notion that modernist art functions entirely within a closed formalist arena separated from and uncontaminated by the real world. The formalist critic Clement Greenberg, in an article first published in 1965 entitled “Modernist Painting,”<sup>44</sup> saw modernism as having achieved a self-referential autonomy. Artwork is elevated as an exclusive experience overseen by the innate rules of its own stylistic uniqueness. Thus, art exists separate

and independent from an external world and the routine affairs of common people.<sup>45</sup> The self-determining nature of visual art meant that legitimate questions are only constructed through reference to itself. Greenberg again famously put forward this core idea in his essay “Towards a New Laocoon,”<sup>46</sup> arguing that the arts follow a trajectory of increasing self-awareness of their own distinctive boundaries. By this convention, aesthetic quality would have priority in deciding the function of art instead of its social or political relevance.

In response, postmodernism rejects “art for art sake,” instead endowing art with explicit sociological purpose. The critical postmodern artist recognizes art as being more than exclusive symbols, but rather a process that functions “as independent lenses onto a troubled world.”<sup>47</sup> As Foucault say:

**The society in which we live, the economic relations within which it functions and the system of power which defines the regular forms and the regular permissions and prohibitions of our conduct...the essence of our life consists, after all, of the political functioning of the society in which we find ourselves.**<sup>48</sup>

The postmodern rejection of autonomous art though such art types as pop, minimalism, conceptual, feminist, outside art, and graffiti, all work to destroy the illusions of modernism. Other postmodern directions further compromise “art for art sake,” such as acceptance of mechanical techniques, appropriation of commercial image styles, removal of the evident artist’s “hand,” acceptance of photography and video, and the employ of industrial materials. Stylistically “Bad” paintings by such artists as Julian Schnabel or Anselm Kiefer, are made deliberately bad in an effort to redefined accepted understanding of value (Figure 8).<sup>49</sup>



Figure 8 Anselm Kiefer, Ashflower



Julian Schnabel, Untitled (La Voz de Antonio Molina)

Nicolas Bourriaud, in his 1998 book Relational Aesthetics, further compromises the idea of autonomous art by defining art as the entirety of life as it is lived, the dynamic social environment, rather than mimetic representation extracted from daily life. He defines relational aesthetics as:

**“A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”<sup>50</sup>**

## Conclusion

Art movements are simplifying but imprecise markers that attempt a categorical description of artwork based on history and philosophy. Given the necessity and complexity of living in the present, we cannot determine which current cultural elements will historically triumph. Likewise, it is difficult to recognize the insistent influence exerted by an evolving civilization on our modes of thinking and being. One indicator of the present's intricacy is just how divided philosophy is on the question of cultural development, with a number of critics celebrating our technological liberation and a number of others despondent over our technological dependence. Art is a dynamic discourse as humans, society, and culture are all constantly changing.

**“It is not once nor twice but times without number that the same ideas make their appearance in the world.” - Aristotle**

A human fabrication based on the outcome of a creative act defines art. Acts of creating involve three interrelated components: the environment (external sensation source,) thought processes (internal perception,) and cultural heritage (knowledge.) All of these three components evolve over time, especially as human societies respond to the advancement of accumulated knowledge. The rate of change in a wide variety of evolutionary systems, including but not limited to knowledge growth, tends to increase exponentially (Figure 9).<sup>51</sup>



Figure 9 Exponential Knowledge Word Cloud

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.galilean-library.org/site/index.php/page/index.html/\\_/essays/introducingphilosophy/12-postmodernism-r28](http://www.galilean-library.org/site/index.php/page/index.html/_/essays/introducingphilosophy/12-postmodernism-r28), Internet resource.

<sup>2</sup> Atkins, Robert. *Artspeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present*. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1997. Print.

<sup>3</sup> a genre of art and outdoor constructions made by untrained artists who do not recognize themselves as artists

<sup>4</sup> Osborne, Richard, and Dan Sturgis. *Art Theory for Beginners*. Danbury, CT: For Beginners, 2009. Print.

<sup>5</sup> a military term meaning ‘advance-guard’

<sup>6</sup> Wilk, Christopher. *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914-1939*. London: V & A Publications, 2006. Print.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

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- <sup>8</sup> The Linearis Institute , Art By Movement , <http://www.linearisinstitute.org/artbymovement.asp>, Internet resource
- <sup>9</sup> Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Print.
- <sup>10</sup> Wallis, Brian. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. Print.
- <sup>11</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Print.
- <sup>12</sup> Guattari, Félix, and Gary Genosko. *The Guattari Reader*. Oxford, OX, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. Print.
- <sup>13</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. Print.
- <sup>14</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Print.
- <sup>15</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print.
- <sup>16</sup> Foucault, Michel, and Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. Print.
- <sup>17</sup> Kristeva, Julia, and Toril Moi. *The Kristeva Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Print.
- <sup>18</sup> Milovanovic, Dragan. *Postmodern Criminology*. New York: Garland Publ, 1997. Print.
- <sup>19</sup> Miller, Robert, Postmodern Spirituality, [http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php?blog\\_id=306](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php?blog_id=306), 2008, Internet resource
- <sup>20</sup> semiology is the study of signs and sign processes, indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication
- <sup>21</sup> Postmodernism: Style And Subversion 1970–1990, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/postmodernism/>, Internet resource
- <sup>22</sup> Poynor, Rick. *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003. Print.
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- <sup>30</sup> Modernism, Dr. Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, <http://arthistoryresources.net/modernism/roots.html>, Sweet Briar College, Internet resource

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- <sup>31</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print.
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- <sup>39</sup> Bourdon, David. *Warhol*. New York: Abrams, 1989. Print.
- <sup>40</sup> Benson, Timothy O, and David Frisby. *Expressionist Utopias: Paradise, Metropolis, Architectural Fantasy*. Los Angeles, Calif: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993. Print.
- <sup>41</sup> Power for Progress, 1970's nuclear power plant comic book, distributed in 1971 to visitors of the Big Rock Power Plant, Charlevoix County, Michigan USA
- <sup>42</sup> Lyman, Stanford M. *Roads to Dystopia: Sociological Essays on the Postmodern Condition*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001. Print.
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- <sup>46</sup> Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003. Print.
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