

**Provisional notes on matters relevant to historiographical/analytical issues:
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Postmodernism: Some Central Features and Controversies

1. Initial Statement

In the concise description of one of its critics, Terry Eagleton, postmodernism is “*a style of thought* which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity, and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history, and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities.” (Eagleton goes on to analyze the historical conditions contributing to the rise of postmodernism.)¹

Thus a crucial component of this “style” is the embrace of a *decentered* conception of things, one in which the once-held convictions of “centeredness,” neutrality, abstraction, objectivity, “naturalness,” and established authority (“truth, reason . . . [etc.]”) have been unmasked as illusions never again to be harbored. The postmodern world (think of cyberspace) is rather a world in which central order or coherence is dissolved into countless separate sites or cells of discourse, power, and personal interest—a falling-apart of the principle of central control; a

¹ Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, p. vii. Italics mine. Eagleton argues that postmodernism arose, in part, out of the profound disillusion—in the 1950s, 1960s, and especially post-1968—of “a radical movement [Marxism] which had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime, if even then. . . . a repulse so definitive that it seemed to discredit the very paradigms with which such politics had traditionally worked” (p. 1). What seems central here is the contention that postmodernism proceeded in large part as the result of a shattering of faith—followed by a theory-based denunciation of the world that had led to or permitted the loss of faith on such a grand scale.

dissolution of the binding glue; a radical dispersion of sites of authority and the embrace of an ungovernable multiplicity of interpretations and “meaning-events.”²

According to the degree to which such antifoundational axioms are insisted upon (no transcendental or foundational truth beyond language-systems, no stable meaning, and so on) we may distinguish between *hard postmodernism* and *soft postmodernism*. (The latter is a style of thought that is influenced by some of the arguments but adapts, modifies, or rejects others.) This summary deals primarily with hard postmodernism.

By hard postmodernism, then, I mean the uncompromising modes of it found primarily in metatheory—in “pure theory” or the philosophy of history—rather than in actual text-critical or historical practice. The anti-foundationalism of hard postmodernism’s underlying axioms seems difficult to sustain in practice, although such underlying concepts are often alluded to and accepted as influential in practical, quasi-“deconstructionist” histories, neo-Marxist histories, postcolonial and “multicultural histories,” and textual-historical work in general that intersects with what has come to be called “identity politics.”

Again: in practice, the arguments of hard postmodernism—particularly its critique of Western/patriarchal/industrial/“high-art” power structures—are often selectively cited as support for two different sets of text-analytical projects that intersect notably, but by no means completely, with postmodernism and its “linguistic turn”: 1) the “identity politics” (“politics of difference,” “oppositional discourse”) of what has been frequently been described as the “cultural left,” the Anglo-American heirs to the radical politics of the New Left in the 1960s³ (and which often leads to advocacy on behalf of multiculturalist and or “diversity” agendas); 2) neo- or post-Marxism (in the manner, for example, of Christopher Norris, Terry Eagleton, or Fredric Jameson, some of whom are explicit critics of postmodernism’s attack on the concept of “truth” and the validity of scientific methodologies). One might conceptualize these three phenomena (postmodernism, identity politics, neo-Marxism) as large, intersecting circles of disparate practices particularly attractive to the cultural left—three modes of inquiry that, however else they might differ, often find themselves to be mutually supportive in their devotion to the hermeneutics of suspicion, to transformationalist politics, and to the radical protest of (and desire to expose and/or subvert) past traditions.⁴

² “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”

³ As argued, e.g., in Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (1998).

⁴ In part, these phenomena—particularly the first two—may also be understood as a continuation of a characteristic trope of Western intellectual thought from at least the nineteenth century onward, namely

But even the above observation needs qualification—for much surrounding postmodernism is deeply contested. One might note, for example, that (arguing principally from the “humanist” left) such recent critics as Richard Wolin (*Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas*) and Mark Lilla (ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy*) identify the general cast of postmodernist thought (E.g., Derrida, Foucault) as a French-leftist appropriation of certain nihilist and antihumanist thought more characteristic of the German hard-*right* from the late nineteenth century through World War II (Nietzsche, Spengler, Heidegger, the withering and “total critique of modernity,” and so on). Thus Wolin, for example, writes—controversially—of Derrida as “left Heideggerianism” and even “left fascism,” suggesting that a central issue in the history of “postmodern” thought is to determine how certain rightist ideas—discredited within their own habitat after the war—were reassembled under the auspices of a movement that liked to consider itself as “leftist.” Some of this mode of reasoning has been fueled by the recent Heidegger and De Man controversies (exposés of earlier support of the Nazi regime, etc.). Needless to say, such charges are disputed by many Derrideans, and of late Derrida himself has claimed a more explicit drift toward the left and has written favorably of Marx’s work. The whole topic is extremely controversial and needs much more work.

2. General

Perhaps the basic axiom of that style (JH): a non-negotiable reversal of traditional Enlightenment and/or humanist axioms—a reversal that is alternately nihilistic, linguistically playful or mischievous, and de(con)structive.⁵ Hard postmodernism typically announces itself as an

an extreme dissatisfaction with the abstraction, intellectual distancing, logic and rationality, objectivity, and seeming alienation produced by “modern” philosophical, literary, and scientific projects. The characteristic anxiety here—which can manifest itself in any number of styles and variants—is a sense that rational abstraction, systematic reasoning, the priority of “mind” over “body,” etc— provides only a partial sense of the human being. Typically, the idea is presented along with a myth of a fall from an earlier wholeness (e.g., from the integrity of Ancient Greece, from pagan times, etc.), a shattering, coupled with a sense that in the past few centuries only the partial, rational view has dominated and suppressed the other aspects of the human being. The remedy, invariably it seems, is the restoration of the nonrational, “Dionysian,” intuitive, bodily, mystical, emotional, or pagan side of the human being. The theme is clearly articulated in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, for instance (Apollonian and Dionysian sides of the human being), and it recurs in Heidegger (*Being and Time*, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” etc.) and many other writers. The varied indictments are generally quite similar. What differs—often markedly—is the prescription of the remedy (that is, the precise aspects of the human being that are to be recovered or restored).

⁵ Note: the term “postmodernism” itself—“after modernism”—implies most clearly a radical break with the ideology of “modernism” as a style of thought—a break that occurred in and around the decade of the 1960s (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 1). Characteristically and paradoxically, the term implies a teleology (“this is appropriately the next stage in the history of thought”) that the doctrine itself disallows. (See below.)

antihumanism, often embraced with gleeful or welcoming zeal, in the spirit, perhaps, of bitter, subversive play—a play that has left the shattered, illusory “modernist” past far behind: a playful *élan* intermixed with a post-Nietzschean nihilism that interprets “truth” and “knowledge” claims as arbitrary assertions of social power within interest groups, some of whom have been in a position to force their views on others. Thus Hayden White in 1979, summarizing this aspect of Foucault’s thought: “Wherever Foucault looks, he finds nothing but discourse; and wherever discourse arises, he finds a struggle between those groups that claim the ‘right’ to discourse and those groups that are denied the right to their own discourse.”⁶

One might notice, *en passant*, that it is precisely for such reasons that the system is what Karl Popper would have called a theory that “immunizes itself against . . . refutations.”⁷ From Popper’s [skeptical] point of view, one of its [unsavory] attractions, perhaps, would be that within its own sphere of thinking it has made certain that it is impermeable to “rational” attack or “correction” from outside (since the principle of an extra-systemic test of “truth” or “reasonableness” appealing to a higher “Enlightenment” or neutral rationality is not admitted as legitimate within the system). Postmodernists, one supposes, would probably declare Popper’s modes of reasoning illegitimate, authoritarian, constraining—a consequence of his “subject position.”

Hence, as an article of faith: postmodernism characteristically displays a non-negotiable, irreverent opposition to traditionally established Western systems, particularly to those systems that have exerted increasing social power and style over the past three centuries, most notably in the industrial West. We normally find, therefore, an irreconcilable opposition to:

- 1) liberal humanism (based on the concept of the free choice of the individual) and free-market-based [capitalistic] liberal democracy (including modern-liberal mixed economies), of which the increasingly-exported culture of the USA is the chief exemplar;⁸

Another issue, of course, is the degree to which the century-old concept of modernism was itself related to Enlightenment thought.

⁶ White, “Foucault’s Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism” [1979], *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), p. 114.

⁷ As in Popper, “The Problem of Demarcation” [1974], in *Popper Selections*, ed. David Miller (Princeton, 1985), pp. 126-128.

⁸ Note, though, that some critics of postmodernism have argued that the the principle of decenteredness, considered from certain perspectives, could resonate sympathetically with the “unregulated” economic circulation of the free marketplace—thus forging an (unintended?) alliance with capitalism.

- 2) classical Marxism (scientific or utopian), especially as carried out in practice; classical Marxist analysis grounded in economic determinism.
- 3) traditional scientific inquiry or humanistic inquiries modeled in part after scientific practice—any inquiry, that is, with “truth” or “progress” or “objectivity” claims, however modest.

Note: clearly, those who strongly affirm tenets associated with 1, 2, or 3 above will generally find themselves in strong opposition to certain—sometimes many—aspects of postmodernism. Thus “hard” postmodernism is characteristically embedded in controversy—from left, right, and center.

Some key values within the hard-postmodernist (theoretical) style: subversion; decentering; skepticism; resistance; denaturalizing; laughter; irony; language-play, mischievous irreverence. And coming along with these things, usually (or characteristically):

- 1) the favoring of an emphatically *theoretical discourse/theoretical vocabulary as a style of writing*—as well as a persistent style/strategy of forging explicit theoretical alliances with a canon of key postmodern writers (via footnotes, flamboyant adoption of theoretical/philosophical vocabulary, citations of structuralist and postmodern authorities that claim to render past methods naïve or obsolete).⁹

Note: These canonic-theoretical writers are typically used *pandisciplinarily*—as an overarching theoretical solvent to be applied to all existing academic disciplines—in part as a strategy of: 1) overturning or subverting seemingly “common-sense” observations or traditional practices that might seem “natural” to many observers; and 2) subverting the notion of “limited” or “bounded” disciplines themselves (and thus hard postmodernism remains in unalterable opposition to specialized knowledge and the authority of the “expert”). Hence, those neo-canonic theoretical writers are

⁹ Obviously, some canonic sources of the postmodern “style” are: Nietzsche (with Marx and Freud, the grand ancestors of what Ricoeur, in *Freud and Philosophy*, called the “hermeneutics of suspicion”), Heidegger, Foucault, Barthes, Althusser, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard, Kristeva, Cixous—and for anglophone historians the writings of Hayden White, etc.] (Cf. Nietzsche’s incoming laughter in *Zarathustra?*—the *Übermensch* laughing out the old supposed verities? cf. Nietzsche’s concept of “critical history” [*Untimely Meditations*, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” CUP edition, pp. 73-74]; cf. the theses of Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*)

characteristically imported from *outside* a discipline (Literature, art, history, music) with the clear aim of trumping, replacing, or overturning what is claimed to be the limited or “naive” traditional work within the discipline at hand.

- 2) often (although certain types of “pure” postmodernist theory might seem to disallow this): sharply polarized, emphatically “emancipatory” political alliances (implicit or explicit) with groups previously excluded from or not participating in political or economic power; emphatic rejection (resistance) to “establishment” power; liberation of the “marginalized” or “subaltern” voice, the suppressed or silent term of the binary opposition. (This aspect of postmodern thought allies itself well with the concerns of identity politics.)
- 3) the “liberation” (or emphatic foregrounding) of certain topics (often formerly finessed or sidelined altogether) deemed useful to the above political and transformational aims: power, race, gender, sexuality, “the body and its pleasures” (Foucault), popular culture, etc.¹⁰

3. More Specifically: Ten Core Axioms?

Hard Postmodernism is characterized especially through its dismissal or disallowing (denouncing and unmasking) of certain key axioms of Enlightenment thought that have been powerfully elaborated in liberal-humanist Europe and America. The most prominent:

1. Dismissal of the *realist* position in philosophy and science (*metaphysical realism*—the conviction that real things—matter and energy—exist “out there” for us to know about) and the concomitant rejection of the position that the language of science, at least, is legitimately *referential* to the things that are genuinely “out there.” For the hard postmodernist, material reality as such does not exist outside of our own minds—or outside of our language-systems—or if it does, it is profoundly unknowable. As such, scientific inquiry and its supposed methodological rigor—

¹⁰ Both 2 and 3 above are clearly marked by, and historicizable through, the spirit of the French student revolutions, the post-May-1968 style of thought. See, e.g. Eric Matthews, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996); and the sharply critical (and controversial) “neo-liberal” account by Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary Schnackenberg Cattani (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1990) [orig., *La pensée 68: Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (1985)]

beliefs in causation, energy exchange, principles of mathematics, and the like—are fundamentally grounded in illusion and inescapable language-systems (which themselves “produce” the supposed knowledge in question). (Similarly, for the hard-postmodern historian, the “past” does not exist as a real “thing out there” to be discovered. Rather, it is an illusion produced by discourse.)

Some corresponding strategies:

- a) To the extent that one chooses to theorize about science, adopt a philosophical stance of skeptical *anti-realism*; Within such a system—even one acknowledged provisionally—there can be no value in the “correspondence” theory of truth because there is nothing knowable “out there” for our claims to correspond to.
- b) The postmodern or poststructuralist versions of the *anti-realist* philosophical position will often adopt a position of *anti-referentialism* in language: language refers only to itself, in endless play; language cannot be grounded in real things “out there” (Derrida).

2. Denial (decentering) of the individual “subject” or liberal “bourgeois ego”¹¹ / of a personal identity or essence / of a centered, coherent, or unique personality / of individual “agency” / of “Man” or “humanity” or the “individual” as anything but a transitory, merely contingent social construction.¹² (This is a concept sometimes described in other terms, such as the “individual as concrete subject” created only by an “interpellation of ideology.”)¹³ As such, postmodernism (along with structuralism) is often described as an *antihumanism* (that is, as definitionally

¹¹ The term is from Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 15.

¹² As, most famously (and controversially), in Foucault, the conclusion of *The Order of Things* (Vintage ed.): “Ought we not to admit that, since language is here once more, man will return to that serene non-existence in which he was formerly maintained by the imperious unity of Discourse? Man had been a figure occurring between two modes of language; or, rather, he was constituted only when language, having been situated within representation and, as it were, dissolved in it, freed itself from that situation at the cost of its own fragmentation. . . . As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. . . . [If the features of discourse that constructed “man” were now to crumble] as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (pp. 386-87). In the same passage Foucault sought to qualify these things as mere “questions,” not assertions. But among his readership, the harder point—closer, surely, to the burden of the rest of his thought at this time—was the one that stuck.

¹³ The terms here are from Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127-186 (e.g., pp. 170-177). [Althusser’s Marxist project is more “structuralist” in nature than poststructuralist] (Interpellation = a “hailing,” a calling into concrete existence.)

opposed to the humanism of various systems emerging out of the Enlightenment—a humanism that would foreground or tip the balance toward individual decision, reflection, free-will, creation, and personal choice).

Some corresponding strategies:

- a) the advocacy of an inescapable process of *social constructionism* (or “*social constructivism*”)—the axiom that society and/or “discourse” overwhelmingly determines who and what we are—in which the illusion of the individual or individual thought is merely the product of an underlying “base,” “structure,” *epistème*, ideology, or “paradigm” of thought (“cultural formation,” “discursive formation,” etc.).¹⁴
- b) the favoring of interpretations that insist on the *denaturalization* of the individual and seemingly “common” individual practices and beliefs (that is, the insistence that what many of us might think of as “natural” or transhistorical is in fact contingent and socially constructed by discourse) and the consequent *decentering* of the individual personality, as it, too, dissolves into textual discursiveness (as a feature or product of discourse). Here the writings of Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida are invariably influential.
- c) the insistence (*contra*, for instance, the recent claims of “evolutionary psychology”) that there is anything natural or hard-wired in gender roles across human cultures. Once-seemingly “natural” aspects of gender, therefore, should be viewed as only “performative,” a cultural option that may be altered by subsequent acts of resistant performativity.¹⁵

¹⁴ For a pointedly worded rejoinder from one philosopher of science to the concept of social constructionism and its cultural purposes, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ While the basic idea of the social construction of sexual identity was influentially posited in such works as Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, the classic formulation of this position is to be found in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* [orig. ed. 1990], (rev ed. London: Routledge, 1999): “If the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its ‘interior’ signification on its surface? . . . Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.” (p. 177); “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body. . . .” (p. 179).

3. Denial of a grounding “truth” or ultimate verifiable grounds of explanation and/or interpretation (dismissal of the “correspondence theory of truth,” in which “truth” is defined as correspondence with the facts) / denial of certainty, of the claims given to Western logic and reason / generally unmoved by appeals to empirical “evidence,” which is viewed as suspect and unattainable. Deep suspicion of—or phobia toward—any “truth claim,” which is dismissed as naïve, an illusion, and a potential source of authoritarian abuse (in part since “truth claims” or any sort can lead to coercive, disciplinary, or totalized systems that forcibly exclude the interests, beliefs, or world-views of other voices, other subject positions).¹⁶ In extreme formulations, any claim based on concepts of “truth” or “authority” may be equated with an imposition of “violence”—which must, correspondingly, be resisted.

Some corresponding strategies:

- a) insistence on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign [or word] (following Saussure) and (following Lacan, Derrida, and others) insistence on the endless deferral of meaning, the free play of signifiers; the disallowing of foundationalism or “logocentrism” (or, with the French-feminist twist indicting the belief in a grounded meaning as patriarchal, “phallogocentrism”); the insistence on the Derridean principle *différance*; cf. discourse as a type of “language game” (Lyotard, following Wittgenstein) rather than as something grounded in “truth” or objective reference.
 - b) Within both French and Anglo-American philosophy—if “truth” remains an issue at all: adoption of some version of the coherence or pragmatic theory of truth as (arbitrary) consensus within a group. One may thus acknowledge what may be regarded as “proximate truth” or “proximate meaning” (the “truth-effect” or the “meaning-effect”)—what seems to work within a culture or interpretive group, although no larger truth-claims can be made. Thus, abandoning the concept of a fixed center, philosophy itself becomes a language-game useful to the interests of certain groups or a mere mode of fiction (Rorty’s controversial claim).
- 4) Dismissal of truth claims as mere fictions related to *power*, to the “*policing*” of *knowledge* and the willingness of *regimes of discourse* to impose “*disciplinary*” actions and constant *surveillance* (usually with “fascist” implications or explicit charges) on those who might not conform to what

¹⁶ Cf. the discussion in Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 378-379.

those in power acknowledge. Cf. Foucault's concept of "power/knowledge," grounded (but extended, systematized, made more theoretical) in aspects of Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Will to Power*, in which the theory is already essentially laid out. Cf. Louis Althusser's term, "ideological state apparatus."

Central to the Foucauldian world-view—and in this respect notably different from Nietzsche's concept of power—is the notion that "Power is everywhere It comes from everywhere."¹⁷ It is not situated in a central site or wielded from a central place. Instead we find a dispersal of power throughout society—a dispersal into countless hidden or concealed microsites, exerting authority and discipline in unnoticed, unexpected, and insidious ways. Thus we confront a plurality of power-sites, or as Best and Kellner put it (describing Foucault's theory), power is "irreducibly plural, that is, it proliferates and thrives in the local and capillary levels of society."¹⁸ (Foucault would come to argue—or imply—that resistance to such power, however futile that might seem, must likewise be waged in countless microsites, seeping into, corroding, and dissolving disciplinary power wherever it is found.)

5. Denial of the possibility of reasonable objectivity in any inquiry; no styles of inquiry or analysis may be considered superior to or more desirable than any others. Since knowledge cannot be in any sense objective, appeals to "evidence" ring hollow. (Hence those who claim that such distinctions can be made are only exercising arbitrary power in their own interests. Hence: radical dehierarchization and decentering of all modes of inquiry.¹⁹)

Some corresponding strategies:

a) unmasking of the hidden interests and latent injustices or violence behind "scientific" or hermeneutic inquiries that have exerted power in the past. (Foucault, etc.)

¹⁷ The *locus classicus* of Foucault's theory of power—the source of the above quotation—may be found in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1—the opening of the chapter entitled "Method" (Vintage ed., pp. 92ff.).

¹⁸ Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, p. 56.

¹⁹ Cf. Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, Chapter 1: the key terms are "denaturalization," "demystification," "dehierarchization," "dereferentialism," and "deconstruction.")

- b) Upfront problematizing and display of the postmodern writer's "subject position," especially insofar as s/he belongs to a certain class, race, or interest group. "Whose knowledge?"—and who has the right to impose that knowledge on others?
- c) On methodological, sometimes "moral" grounds: exclusion (or denial of the legitimacy) of certain voices and/or modes of inquiry from certain previously "marginalized" topics deemed properly accessible only to certain subject positions. ("Only x has the authority to write about y.") (Note: It may be—as often elsewhere—that whenever this position of "authority" is held, the demands of identity politics trump those of pure postmodernism, which would dispute any hierarchy of authority.)
6. Hence histories are merely modes of fiction / histories as self-interested fictions (novelistic indulgences or "totalizing narrative representations")²⁰ constructed to affirm or validate existing power interests (Nietzsche; Foucault; Hayden White; Richard Rorty; etc.) Since history is fundamentally meaningless, no historical account is ipso facto better than any other, although certain fictions may serve the interests of certain communities better than do others. (Cf. again the "pragmatic theory of truth"—that which is consistent and effective [that which "works"] for an individual group. Cf. also the "truth" issue above: Rorty's claim that philosophy, too, is a mode of writing, of fiction—the relinquishing of philosophy's search for truth.)
7. Denial of the desirability or validity of *linear conceptions of history*, history conceived as a narrative with a clear trajectory or goal (in other words, the undermining of the authority of virtually all prior conceptions of history); the invalidating of *metanarratives* (or *grand récits*, as, famously, with Lyotard's dictum from 1979: "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives")²¹ or "Great Stories" (Berkhofer); the denial that history has a purpose or inner coherence. Hence: a "suspicion of narrative mastery and master narratives."²²

Some corresponding strategies:

²⁰ As argued in Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 62-92.

²¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition, a Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1984), p. xxiv.

²² Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 64.

- a) Unmask the interests underpinning influential, traditional linear conceptions of history. Linear histories (or views of time), therefore, are to be interrogated as oppressive (sometimes violent, often gendered “masculine”) histories that, as a matter of self-interested principle, exclude equally legitimate voices.
 - b) As a counterbalance, support historical accounts (or views of time) that replace linearity with *circularity* (sometimes seen as perpetually renewable, less violent, more inclusive, and often gendered “feminine” or allied with elemental, ancient, or non-Judeo-Christian modes of thought), *discontinuity* (sharp, non-logical breaks), or *simultaneously existing contradictory patterns*.
8. Denial of the possibility of coherent, stable meanings (much less “unity” claims) within individual utterances, documents, or works that some have regarded as “art”; denial of unitary, coherent meanings and, ipso facto, of unitary interpretations that claim to be “correct.” At best, one finds illusory, transitory “meaning-effects,” whose ideology or false coherence one is committed to deconstructing.

Some corresponding strategies:

- a) In the hardest of postmodern positions, insistence on “no meaning” (no grounded meaning) within the work or utterance—at least no “meaning” in any truly grounded or foundational sense. Endless deferral of meaning, slippage of the signifier, etc. All is “discourse.”
- b) Alternatively: demonstration of the instability of meaning within a seemingly closed utterance (Derrida): seek out the non-resolved, multiple voices in a text or utterance (Bakhtin; Derrida, De Man); seek to listen to the absences or silences within a work (what is suppressed or not said as a factor in the multiplicity of meaning—“the presence of absence”); demonstrate how the utterance, through its own indeterminacy, undermines its own meaning by implying and maintaining a multiplicity of contradictory and nonresolvable possibilities (Derrida, etc.).
- c) Thus seek to demonstrate instability, disunity, contradiction, inner nonresolved tension of meaning within the utterance. Be suspicious of single-minded, unitary claims of “what something means.”

- d) Cf. the Baudrillard-Bauman variant: Characteristic of postmodern times is a spectacular superfluity of potential meanings, none of which carries the authority to prove decisive in any contest of assertions. On this view all representations or language-signs are characterized less by an absence of meaning than by an undecidable *excess* of meanings (a dizzying excess rendering the traditional concept of “meaning” no longer applicable). Thus the sociologist Bauman in 1992: “[Current culture and art share] the attributes of pluralism, absence of universally binding authority, levelling up of hierarchies, interpretive polyvalence. It is, as Baudrillard has argued, a culture of excess. It is characterized by the overabundance of meanings, coupled with (or made all the more salient by) the scarcity of adjudicating authorities. . . . The body of objectively available cultural products is well in excess of the assimilating capacity of any member of society.”²³
9. Collapse of the concept of “work of art” into “*text*” (as in Barthes’s essay, “From Work to Text”), along with the corresponding revocation of the “art” claim (“art in the strong sense”) as deceptive, an illusion: “the end of the work of art’ and the arrival of the text” (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. xvii)—the claim that a canon of individual works is to be afforded a privilege of reverence, contemplation, and study / hence dismissal of any criterion that claims to distinguish between “high” and “low” arts or artistic excellence and inferiority / collapse of “art” into social praxis within interest groups.

Some corresponding strategies:

- a) Demystification of the contemplative or elevated claims of “high art.” Unmasking of “high art” as a persuasive narcotic or illusion expressive primarily of the desire to maintain political or cultural power interests; hence a refusal to grant art the status of autonomy or even “relative autonomy.” Art may be seen, with Bourdieu, merely as “symbolic” and/or “cultural capital”—cultural commodities to accumulate and display in an “economy of prestige” and/or “distinction.” (The once-sidelined “popular culture,” on the other hand, may be seen [by “cultural studies”] in either of two fundamentally opposed ways: 1) as a sphere of manipulation by those in power (the “culture industry”),

²³ Zygmunt Bauman, “Sociology and Postmodernity,” in *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 31.

or 2) as a noble, authentic “site of resistance” speaking on behalf of or giving voice to the disenfranchised or marginalized.)

- b) Contempt for a reverential or personally affirmative view of (especially) “high art”—including the concept of “beauty”—and its corresponding canon. “Art”—encompassing various types of formal “display texts,” presentational images, writing, music, dance, or fashion—is to be interrogated *not* primarily as a space of beauty and wonder but rather as a “site” or “locus” of social tensions, a cultural “space” in which existing social tensions may be revealed and brought to the surface: art is thus important only because it is a particularly effective (and socially persuasive) site of social struggle and potential transformation. Art is to be unmasked as ideology.
- c) Hence: Either a deriding or dismissal of the practice of analyzing the “madness” of supposed art objects (their *poetic* aspect, their “beauty”) with the intent of helping us to contemplate or “appreciate” the craft and skill of how they were put together (and how they might relate to other art objects within their generic spheres and traditions)—as opposed what their actual or potential role might be in the advancing or the retarding of the interests of social or political transformation. (Echoing the Stalinist practice of the 1930s [with its sharp distinction between “formalism” and “socialist realism”], the dismissed analytical method is sometimes branded as “formalist” analysis—to distinguish it from a “socially engaged” analysis, that is, one usually linked in self-evident ways to transformationalist politics.)
- d) Conviction: To be genuinely moved by “beauty” or high art (especially that of the liberal-bourgeois period and the period of high modernism) is to be duped by regimes of power (again, according to some charges, potentially “fascist”)—to display the nostalgic “weakness” of still being marked by the old ways. Instead, that art is to be explained (and its “art effect” explained away) by interpreting it *symptomatically*, as instances of standard, well-known social categories, discourses, discursive formations, and generic moves.²⁴

²⁴ (Richard Rorty, who opposes this position—which he regards as characteristically “academic” and “dry”—writes: “Adoption of this line of thought produces what I call ‘knowingness.’ Knowingness is a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm.”) Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature,” in *Achieving Our Country* (1998), p. 126

10. Correspondingly with the above, a dismissal of the “depth” claim in “art” or in any utterances: all is surface appearance without furnishing viewers, readers, or listeners a genuine opportunity for contemplative depth. (Cf. Baudrillard’s concept of the *simulacrum*, superficial replications and shallow images [like endless photocopies?] replacing that which was once thought to be originary substance.) Thus postmodern work (including historical writing) often features a succession of playful, intense, and sometimes unrelated surfaces (signifiers) that never come to rest in a signified, or a grounded meaning or unitary communication. Hence art becomes a depthless play of intense simulacra. What matters is not the “logical” coherence or the appeal to accuracy or evidence; what matters is the bravura and the intensity of the performance—the performative aspect of art (or...of writing analysis or history...the virtuosity and intensity of the surface from moment to moment).

Cf. Fredric Jameson’s four “constitutive features of the postmodern”

- a) “a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary theory and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum.”
- b) “a consequent weakening of historicity” [in favor of a private temporality featuring a ‘schizophrenic’ structure of floating signifiers, as discussed by Lacan] (later, p. 17: “pastiche”—“a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm”)
- c) “a whole new type of emotional ground tone—what I will call ‘intensities’” (later, p. 10, “a strange, compensatory, decorative exhilaration”)
- d) “the deep constitutive relationships of all this to a whole new technology.”²⁵

Cf. Zygmunt Bauman (1992) on postmodernity as “a state of mind”:

“This is a state of mind marked above all by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving *destructiveness*. It seems sometimes that postmodern mind is a critique caught at the moment of its ultimate triumph: a critique that finds it ever more difficult to go on being critical just because it has destroyed everything it used to be critical about; with it, off went the urgency of being critical. There is nothing left to be opposed to. . . . The critical theory confronts an object that has softened, melted, and liquidized to the point that the sharp edge of critique goes through with nothing to stop it. . . . How farcical it seems to fight for genuine art when one can no more drop anything incidentally without the dropped object being proclaimed art. . . . [Postmodernism]

²⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 6.

denies in advance the right of all and any revelation to slip into the place vacated by the deconstructed/discredited rules. It braces itself for a life without truths, standards, and ideals.”²⁶

²⁶ Bauman, “Introduction,” *Intimations of Postmodernity*, pp. vi-ix.