Dictionary of Postmodern Terms
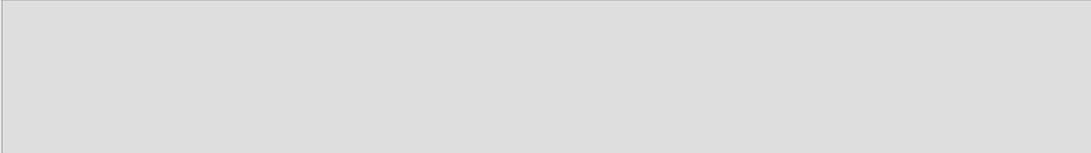
This section contains a listing of the key terms used in discussing postmodernism and found throughout this site.

Alterity

- Alterity is a philosophical principle of exchanging one's own perspective for that of the "other".
- A lack of personal identity.
- See Wikipedia, Alterity, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alterity (Jan 2007)

Aporia

- An aporia is a philosophical puzzle, paradox, or impasse often used in conjunction with 'deconstruction'.
- A state of wonder and awe due to contemplating the mysteries of life and the universe.
- See Wikipedia, Aporia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aporia (Jan 2007)

Bricolage

- Bricolage is a processes by which traditional objects or language are given a new, often subversive, meaning and context.
- Art technique where works are constructed from various available materials ("found items" or mass-produced "junk").
- See Wikipedia, Bricolage, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bricolage (Jan 2007)

Catharsis

- A form of emotional cleansing, first described by Aristotle, which occurs simply from the passive act of viewing a tragedy.
- A postmodern analogy is that the media's focus on violence is the method by which society cleanses its collective psyche.
- See Wikipedia, Catharsis, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharsis (Jan 2007)

Commodification

- Term used in Marxist economics when economic value is assigned to something not traditionally considered a commodity.
- Examples of commodification include: ideas, culture, identity, and even the human body.
- See Wikipedia, Commodification, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commodification (Jan 2007)

Constructivism

- Term attributed to Jean Piaget, who described how knowledge is assimilated and internalized during the process of learning.
- Postmods contend that the process of matching internal models to the real world is inherently colored by the bias of the observer.
- See Wikipedia, Constructivism, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism (Jan 2007)

Cybernetics

- Cybernetics is a process by which a biological organism enhances its abilities by the integration of technology.
- So called "cyborgs" are a common feature of science fiction (Popular examples include: Robocop and the Borg).
- In postmodernism, much philosophical weight is given to this merging (and interdependence) of man and technology.
- Many consider there to be similar impact due to reliance on everyday items like glasses or hearing aids.
- See Wikipedia, Cyborg, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyborg (Jan 2007)

Cyberpunk

- Cyberpunk is a science fiction genre based in the near-future and often set in post-industrial dystopias.
- The focus of Cyberpunk has been described as "high tech and low life": technology run amok with gritty film noir motifs.
- Its name is a synthesis of Cybernetics and Punk and often features body modification.
- Plots often involve hackers, artificial intelligences, and mega corporations.
- Popular examples include: Snow Crash and Neuromancer
- See Wikipedia, Cyberpunk, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberpunk (Jan 2007)

Cyberspace

- A term coined by [William Gibson](#) in Neuromancer and Burning Chrome to describe an all-encompassing, virtual reality internet.
- "A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation... A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding..."
- A similar term, Metaverse, was used by [Neal Stephenson](#) in Snow Crash
- See Wikipedia, Cyberspace, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberspace (Jan 2007)

Dadaism

- Dadaism was a cultural movement which attempted to reject and destroy the prevailing standards in art through anti-art.
- It was a reaction to the horrors of World War I, which its followers believed was due to the reason and logic of the modernists.
- Dada strove to have no meaning and its works are often described as random or without organization.
- Ironically, Dada became an influential movement in modern art (examples include Duchamp's "readymades" found objects)
- See Wikipedia, Dada, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dada (Jan 2007)

Deconstruction

- Deconstruction is a term coined by the French philosopher [Jacques Derrida](#) for a process of critiquing literature and language.
- It analyzes the built in bias of language and questions its ability to represent reality.
- Critics see deconstruction as oversimplified and "sloppy" intellectual approach to attacking modernism.
- See Wikipedia, Deconstruction, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction (Jan 2007)

Dystopia

- Dystopias are societies usually characterized by decay and/or oppressive governments.
- Relevant authors include [Kurt Vonnegut](#) and [William Gibson](#)
- See Wikipedia, Dystopia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dystopia (Jan 2007)

Flattening of Affect

- Flattening of affect is a scientific term describing a person's detachment and lack of emotional reactivity.
- Used in the postmodern literature to describe technology's dehumanizing impact.
- A key example is the move [2001](#), where the main characters lose their humanity whereas the computer HAL gains "his".
- See Wikipedia, Blunted affect, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blunted_affect (Jan 2007)

Hyperreality

- Hyperreality is a symptom of postmodern culture where a person loses their ability to distinguish reality from fantasy.
- The hyperreal world is often thought of as an idealized enhancement of reality, much preferable to the real life equivalent.
- Present day examples could include reality television, pornagraphy, or multi-player online games.
- See Wikipedia, Hyperreality, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperreality (Jan 2007)

Kitsch

- Kitsch was originally a German term used to categorize art that is considered an inferior copy of an existing style.
- Art (often commercially mass-produced) that is done in bad taste or tries to be overly campy or sentimental.
- From Baudrillard: "one of that great army of 'trashy' objects, made of plaster of Paris or some such imitation material".
- See Wikipedia, Kitsch, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitsch (Jan 2007)

Modernism

- Mordenism is associated with the period of the mid 20th century.
- It is associated with constant change in the pursuit of progress, achievable through rationality and logic.
- In contrast, Postmodernism takes a less optimistic view where constant change becomes the status quo and progress obsolete.
- See Wikipedia, Postmodernism, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism (Jan 2007)

Panopticon

- Panopticon is derived from the Greek opticon (see) and pan (all).
- A type of prison designed to allow the guards to observe all prisoners without their knowledge.
- The goal is to convey a feeling of "invisible omniscience" over the minds of the prisoners.
- The panopticon is a symbol in many dystopian novels, most notably George Orwell's [1984](#)
- See Wikipedia, Panopticon, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panopticon (Jan 2007)

Pastiche

- Pastiche is a tongue-in-cheek imitation or tribute used in literature, art, music, movies, etc.
- Performed with respect to, or in homage to, other works (as opposed to parody which is done in ridicule or sarcasm).
- A popular example is the cartoon The Simpsons, known for its pop culture references and recycled plots.
- See Wikipedia, Pastiche, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pastiche (Jan 2007)

Punctuated Equilibrium

- A theory in evolutionary biology by which otherwise slow evolutionary change happens during sporadic periods of great change.
- Postmodernism analogy of technological or cultural change, often used in conjunction with "tipping point" or "singularity".
- See Wikipedia, Punctuated equilibrium, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punctuated_equilibrium (Jan 2007)

Simulacra

- A simulacra is a copy of a copy, so far removed from its original, that it can stand on its own and even replace the original.
- Term defined by Jean Baudrillard in "The Precession of Simulacra" from Simulacra and Simulation
  "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.... substituting the signs of the real for the real".
  Examples included Disneyland, psychosomatic illness, and the Watergate scandal.
- Another example is the cartoon Betty Boop, who has now become an icon for the long forgotten actresses she was based on.
- See Wikipedia, Simulacrum, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simulacrum (Jan 2007)

Semiotics

- Semiotics is the study of signs, symbols, and how meaning is constructed and understood.
- Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposed the deferentiation between the spoken word (signifier) and mental concept (signified).
- See Wikipedia, Semiotics, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotics (Jan 2007)

Steampunk

- Steampunk is an off-shoot of cyberpunk set in the steam-powered Victorian era.
- A type of speculative fiction where fictional and real technologies occur at an earlier date.
- See Wikipedia, Steampunk, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steampunk (Jan 2007)

Virtual Reality

- Virtual Reality is a simulation technology providing an immersive computer-generated environment.
- The environment may be real (medical applications) or imagined (the Matrix).
- See Wikipedia, Virtual Reality, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_reality (Jan 2007)