Postmodernism

or,

a walk in the fictional woods

This subtitle is an intended postmodern pun
Why? ...

The Simpsons
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdO9orWQ-Nk
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWKFkNFsGBw

Cinzia Scarpino
What is postmodernism?  
What is postmodern?  
What is postmodernity?

Many definitions since the 1970s  
The aim of these definitions was to group and categorize  
some of the thematic and stylistic features  
of the cultural production of the last forty years  
of the twentieth century in  

literature, philosophy, architecture,  
visual arts, music, comics, and cinema
On a historical level, postmodern refers to Postmodernity, a historical period stretching from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Key developments:
- The Cold War and its decline
- The growth of the suburbs as a cultural force
- The increasing ethnic heterogeneity of the American population
- The predominance of television as a cultural medium
- The rise of the computer
Revisiting history

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

postmodern age marked by a profound questioning of the very idea of historical progress
POSTMODERNITY

- Mass genocide of World War II
- Atomic bomb
- McCarthysm
- National traumas of the 1960s
- The Vietnam War
- Assassinations
- The Pentagon Papers 1971
- The Watergate Scandal 1972-74
- Iran-Contra 1986

• The Warren Commission

• The ZAPRUDER VIDEO
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iU83R7rpXQY

CONSPIRACY THEORIES
Skepticism about traditional definitions of narrative form

Suspicion in any form of institutional authority

Skepticism about accessibility to history

Suspicion in any form of narrative authority

Official history into question
“HISTORY IS ONLY ACCESSIBLE TO US IN NARRATIVE FORM”
ASSAULT UPON TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVE FORMS

EMERGENCE OF DISCOURSES OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

MINOR MARGINAL STORIES

gender, sexual, racial and ethnic subjectivities
REVISION OF THE GREAT FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS of American History

NATIVE AMERICANS

SLAVERY

CHINESE IMMIGRATION

SUBVERSION OF THE NATIONAL MASTER NARRATIVES

the great narratives of the past
the narratives written by those who had voice in the past
from which Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicanos had been removed
This novel interweaves Laguna Pueblo (a federally recognized Native American tribe in New Mexico) and Anglo-American version of WW II and its aftermath.

L. H. OSWALD’s life
The Warren Report: “The Joycean Book of America.. the novel in which nothing is left out”.

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON
THE WOMAN WARRIOR (1975)

The marginal becomes central through retelling history from a previously buried viewpoint: that of a slave.

TONI MORRISON
BELOVED (1987)

“The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields. I have not been able to stop my mother’s screams in public libraries or over telephones. Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself into American-feminine. Chinese communication was loud, public. Only sick people had to whisper.”

DON DeLILLO
LIBRA (1988)

HISTORY FROM BELOW / HISTORY FROM THE MARGINS

LESLEI MARMON SILKO
CEREMONY (1977)
TELEVISION

- radical role in the redefinition of the cognitive and narrative modes
- of the historical process revolutionizes the perception of the historical experience
- a sense of national community
- segmenting into smaller segments

Marshall McLuhan
De-historicing effect collapsing space and time

Ep. MAD MEN
JFK’s assassination
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vktOFWbhJwo
FACT MEETS FICTION

FACT

EROSION
DOCUMENTARY
TESTIMONIAL
FUNCTION

NEW
JOURNALISM

JOAN DIDION
Slouching Towards Bethlehem (1968)

TOM WOLFE
The New Journalism (1973)

NORMAN
MAILER
The Armies of the Night (1968)

FICTION

EMPHASIS
AUTHORIAL
PRESENCE
the narrative of the story/history

collapses

into

the narrative discourse of the story/history

F. Jameson

“...the unforeseeable return of narrative, as the narrative of the end of narratives, the return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos ...”
POSTMODERN THEORY

J. F. Lyotard
“La Condition Postmoderne”

J. Derrida
deconstruction
reading contradictions within texts

SKEPTICISM TOWARDS MASTER NARRATIVES AND FOUNDATIONAL* STORIES ABOUT HISTORY AND MODERNITY

ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM DECONSTRUCTION

* belief upon secure foundation of certainty
Gender Studies
Gender is a cultural construction

Queer Studies

Postmodern subject less a self than an intersection of fluctuating subject positions

Languages

Cultures

Social Structures

Deconstruction of subjectivity performed by feminist gay lesbian fiction writers

Judith Butler

A. Rich
The Left Hand of Darkness (1969)
The Word for World Is Forest (1976)
“She Unnames Them” (1988)

“I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house.”
Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*
“...the ...‘death of the subject’... - the psychoanalytic undermining of experiences of personal identity, the aesthetic attack on originality, genius and modernist private style, the waning of ‘charisma’ in the media age and of ‘great men’ in the age of feminism, the fragmentary, schizophrenic aesthetic alluded above ... *the consequence will be that these new collective characters and representations that are groups can no longer, by definition, be subjects*. This is, of course, one of the things that problematize the visions of history or ‘master narratives’ of either bourgeois or socialist revolution (as Lyotard has explained), *for it is hard to imagine such a master narrative without a ‘subject of history’.*”

“What is important in all these internalized challenges to humanism is the interrogating of the notion of consensus. Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement *have now been questioned by the acknowledgement of differences – in theory and in artistic practice*. In its most extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus, whether it be defined in terms of minority (educated, sensitive, elitist) or mass (commercial, popular, conventional) culture ...”
WORK, TEXT, AUTHOR, READER

AESTHETIC UNCERTAINTY OF POSTMODERNISM

INTERROGATING THE FUNCTIONING OF THE AUTHORITY AND THE AUTHOR

Umberto Eco
Opera Aperta (1962)

Roland Barthes
“La mort de l’auteur” (1968)

M. Foucault
“What is an author?” (1969)
MODERNISM
the cultural period
from the earliest
part of the
20th century to
the end of WW II

In literature
“High Modernism”
1920s
James Joyce
T. S. Eliot
Exra Pound
Gertrude Stein

POST-MODERNISM

FORMAL INNOVATION

ENDGAME

POST
MODERNISM
“Literature of
EXHAUSTION”

John Barth
“The Literature of
Exhaustion”
(1967)
“...novels which imitate the
form of a novel, by an author
who imitates the role of
Author”
“...I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her ‘I love you madly’, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly’. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.”

Umberto Eco
OPEN TEXT

PARATEXTS
Footnote, book jackets, Indexes ...

METAFICTION
Irony and fictional self-reflection

INTERTEXTUALITY
Explicit relation of text to other texts

PASTICHE
Incorporation of fragments of other texts (newspaper clips..)
INTERTEXTUALITY, PASTICHE

DONALD BARTHELME
Snow White (1967)

The fairy tale is ironically retold from a parody of feminist perspective

Bantam, New York 1971
QUESTIONS:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes ( ) No ( )
3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes ( ) No ( )
4. That Jane is the wicked stepmother-figure? Yes ( ) No ( )
5. In the further development of the story, would you like more emotion ( ) or less emotion ( )?
6. Is there too much blague in the narration? ( )
   Not enough blague? ( )
7. Do you feel that the creation of new modes of hysteria is a viable undertaking for the artist of today? Yes ( ) No ( )
8. Would you like a war? Yes ( ) No ( )
9. Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension? Yes ( ) No ( )
10. What is it (twenty-five words or less)?

11. Are the seven men, in your view, adequately characterized as individuals? Yes ( ) No ( )
12. Do you feel that the Authors Guild has been sufficiently vigorous in representing writers before the Congress in matters pertaining to copyright legislation? Yes ( ) No ( )
13. Holding in mind all works of fiction since the War, in all languages, how would you rate the present work, on a scale of one to ten, so far? (Please circle your answer)
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
14. Do you stand up when you read? ( ) Lie down? ( ) Sit? ( )
15. In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? ( ) Two sets of shoulders? ( ) Three? ( )
JOHN BARTH
Lost in the Funhouse:
Fiction for Print, Tape,
Live Voice
(1968)

Short story collection
The book opens with “Frame-Tale”—a
“story” in which “ONCE UPON A TIME
THERE” and “WAS A STORY THAT
BEGAN” are printed vertically, one on
each side of the page.

Doubleday, Garden City 1968
Night-Sea Journey

“One way or another, no matter which theory of our journey is correct, it’s myself I address; to whom I rehearse as to a stranger our history and condition, and will disclose my secret hope though I sink for it. Is the journey my invention? Do the night, the sea, exist at all, I ask myself, apart from my experience of them? Do I myself exist, or is this a dream? Sometimes I wonder. And if I am, who am I? The Heritage I supposedly transport? But how can I be both vessel and contents? Such are the questions that beset my intervals of rest.

“My trouble is, I lack conviction. Many accounts of our situation seem plausible to me – where and what we are, why we swim and whither. But implausible ones as well, perhaps especially those, I must admit as possibly correct. Even likely. If at times, in certain humours – stroking in unison, say, with my neighbours and chanting with them ‘Onward! Upward!’ – I have supposed that we have after all a common Maker, Whose nature and motives we may not know, but Who engendered us in some mysterious wise and launched us forth toward some end known but to HIm – if (for a moodslength only) I have been able to entertain such notions, very popular in certain quarters, it is because our night-sea journey partakes of their absurdity. One might even say: I can believe them because they are absurd.

“Has that been said before?

“Another paradox: it appears to be these recesses from swimming that sustain me in the swim. Two measures onward and upward, a falling with the rest, then I float exhausted and dispirited, brood upon the night, the sea, the journey, while the flood bears me a measure back and down: slow progress, but I..."
THE COVER FOR
TROUT FISHING IN AMERICA

The cover for Trout Fishing in America is a photograph taken late in the afternoon, a photograph of the Benjamin Franklin statue in San Francisco’s Washington Square.

Born 1706—Died 1790, Benjamin Franklin stands on a pedestal that looks like a house containing stone furniture. He holds some papers in one hand and his hat in the other.

Then the statue speaks, saying in marble:

PRESENTED BY
H.D. COGSWELL

TO OUR
BOYS AND GIRLS
WHO WILL SOON
TAKE OUR PLACES
AND PASS ON.

Around the base of the statue are four words facing the directions of this world, to the east WELCOME, to the west WELCOME, to the north WELCOME, to the south WELCOME. Just behind the statue are three poplar trees, almost leafless except for the top branches. The statue stands in front of the middle tree. All around the grass is wet from the rains of early February.
William Burroughs

The retreat of the author changes the relationship between the reader and the text. The meaning of texts rely and depend on the reader’s familiarity with the earlier texts they rework. The meaning of creation is tied to the text itself.
1. Plagiarism
I RECALL MY CHILDHOOD
My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian
Name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both
names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter.
So I called myself Peter, and came to be called Peter.
I give Pirrip as my father's family name on
the authority of his tombstone and
my sister-Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married
the blacksmith.

On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother
committed suicide and in September
of 1979 my grandmother (on my mother's side)
died. Ten days ago (it is now almost Christmas 1979)
Terence told my fortune with the Tarot cards.
This was not so much a fortune-whatever
that means-but a fairly, it seems to me,
precise psychic map of the present,
therefore: the future.
READING PLEASURE
THE REJUVINATION OF GENRES

COLLISION OF
POPULAR CULTURE
AND
HIGH CULTURE

POPULAR
LITERARY
GENRES

NOIR

WESTERN

SCIENCE
FICTION
Cyborg
Human/alien/machine
HYBRID

Donna
Haraway
“The Cyborg
Manifesto”
(1991)
THE TWO PHASES OF AMERICAN POSTMODERNISM

EARLY POSTMODERNISTS 1960s

John Barth
Donald Barthelme
Richard Brautigan
Robert Coover
William Gass
Thomas Pynchon

Kurt Vonnegut
Grace Paley

FORMAL DIFFICULTY
IRONIC DISTANCE
BLACK HUMOR

EXPLICIT
SOCIAL CRITIQUE

GRACE PALEY
“At that Time, or The History of a Joke” (1985)

At that time most people were willing to donate organs. Abuses were expected. In fact there was a young woman whose uterus was hysterically ripped from her by a passing gynaecologist. He was distracted, he said, by the suffering if a childless couple in Fresh Meadows. The young woman said, “It wasn’t the pain or the embarrassment, but I think any court would certainly award me the earliest uterine transplant Dr. Heilinger can obtain.”
THE TWO PHASES OF AMERICAN POSTMODERNISM

EARLY POSTMODERNISTS 1960s

- FAITH IN WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE
- CONTINUING PREVALENCE OF MALE WHITE AUTHORSHIP

LATE POSTMODERNISTS 1970s

- EXPLOSION OF OTHER POSTMODERN VOICES
  - WOMEN, GAY, LESBIAN
  - AFRICAN-AMERICAN
  - ASIAN-AMERICAN
  - NATIVE AMERICAN
  - CARIBBEAN
  - HISPANIC

- OVERT SOCIAL CRITIQUE
- NON-EUROPEAN ANTECEDENTS
THE TWO PHASES OF AMERICAN POSTMODERNISM

LATE POSTMODERNISTS
1970s

FACT/FICTION HYBRIDS
NOVEL – MEMOIR - ESSAY

Audre Lorde
“You can’t tear down the master’s house with the master’s tools”

Gloria Anzaldúa
Borderlands/La Frontera
The New Mestiza
(1987)

Audre Lorde
Zami: A New Spelling of My Name
(1983)
They're selling postcards of the hanging
They're painting the passport brown
The beauty parlor is filled with suicides
The crow is in town.
Here comes the blind commissioner
They've got him in a trance.
One hand is tied to the tightrope walker
The other is in his pants.
And the riot squad they're restful
They need somewhere to go.
As 'Laddy and I lock out tonight
From Desolation Row

Right now I can't read too good
Don't send me no more letters, no
Not unless you mail them from
Desolation Row

http://vimeo.com/11222889