

The Modern and the Postmodern: Contrasting Tendencies

The features in the table below are only often-discussed tendencies, not absolutes. In fact, the tendency to see things in seemingly obvious, binary, contrasting categories is usually associated with modernism. The tendency to dissolve binary categories and expose their arbitrary cultural co-dependency is associated with postmodernism. For heuristic purposes only. [From Martin Irvine's PO-MO Page](#)

Modernism/Modernity	Postmodern/Postmodernity
Master Narratives and metanarratives of history, culture and national identity as accepted before WWII (American-European myths of progress). Myths of cultural and ethnic origin accepted as received. Progress accepted as driving force behind history.	Suspicion and rejection of Master Narratives for history and culture; local narratives, ironic deconstruction of master narratives: counter-myths of origin. "Progress" seen as a failed Master Narrative.
Faith in "Grand Theory" (totalizing explanations in history, science and culture) to represent all knowledge and explain everything.	Rejection of totalizing theories; pursuit of localizing and contingent theories.
Faith in, and myths of, social and cultural unity, hierarchies of social-class and ethnic/national values, seemingly clear bases for unity.	Social and cultural pluralism, disunity, unclear bases for social/national/ ethnic unity.
Master narrative of progress through science and technology.	Skepticism of idea of progress, anti-technology reactions, neo-Luddism; new age religions.
Sense of unified, centered self; "individualism," unified identity.	Sense of fragmentation and decentered self; multiple, conflicting identities.
Idea of "the family" as central unit of social order: model of the middle-class, nuclear family. Heterosexual norms.	Alternative family units, alternatives to middle-class marriage model, multiple identities for couplings and childraising. Polysexuality, exposure of repressed homosexual and homosocial realities in cultures.
Faith and personal investment in big politics (Nation-State, party).	Trust and investment in micropolitics, identity politics, local politics, institutional power struggles.
Root/Depth tropes. Faith in "Depth" (meaning, value, content, the signified) over "Surface" (appearances, the superficial, the signifier).	Rhizome/surface tropes. Attention to play of surfaces, images, signifiers without concern for "Depth". Relational and horizontal differences, differentiations.
Crisis in representation and status of the image after photography and mass media.	Culture adapting to simulation, visual media becoming undifferentiated equivalent forms, simulation and real-time media substituting for the real.
Faith in the "real" beyond media, language, symbols, and representations; authenticity of "originals."	Hyper-reality, image saturation, simulacra seem more powerful than the "real"; images and texts with no prior "original". "As seen on TV" and "as seen on MTV" are more powerful than unmediated experience.

Modernism/Modernity	Postmodern/Postmodernity
<p>Dichotomy of high and low culture (official vs. popular culture). Imposed consensus that high or official culture is normative and authoritative, the ground of value and discrimination.</p>	<p>Disruption of the dominance of high culture by popular culture. Mixing of popular and high cultures, new valuation of pop culture, hybrid cultural forms cancel "high"/"low" categories.</p>
<p>Mass culture, mass consumption, mass marketing.</p>	<p>Demassified culture; niche products and marketing, smaller group identities.</p>
<p>Art as unique object and finished work authenticated by artist and validated by agreed upon standards.</p>	<p>Art as process, performance, production, intertextuality. Art as recycling of culture authenticated by audience and validated in subcultures sharing identity with the artist.</p>
<p>Knowledge mastery, attempts to embrace a totality. Quest for interdisciplinary harmony. Paradigms: The Library and The Encyclopedia.</p>	<p>Navigation through information overload, information management; fragmented, partial knowledge; just-in-time knowledge. Paradigms: The Web.</p>
<p>Broadcast media, centralized one-to-many communications. Paradigms: broadcast networks, TV.</p>	<p>Digital, interactive, client-server, distributed, user-motivated, individualized, many-to-many media. Paradigms: Internet file sharing, the Web and Web 2.0.</p>
<p>Centering/centeredness, centralized knowledge and authority.</p>	<p>Dispersal, dissemination, networked, distributed knowledge.</p>
<p>Determinacy, dependence, hierarchy.</p>	<p>Indeterminacy, contingency, polycentric power sources.</p>
<p>Seriousness of intention and purpose, middle-class earnestness.</p>	<p>Play, irony, challenge to official seriousness, subversion of earnestness.</p>
<p>Sense of clear generic boundaries and wholeness (art, music, and literature).</p>	<p>Hybridity, promiscuous genres, recombinant culture, intertextuality, pastiche.</p>
<p>Design and architecture of New York and Berlin.</p>	<p>Design and architecture of LA and Las Vegas</p>
<p>Clear dichotomy between organic and inorganic, human and machine.</p>	<p>Cyborgian mixing of organic and inorganic, human and machine and electronic.</p>
<p>Phallic ordering of sexual difference, unified sexualities, exclusion/bracketing of pornography.</p>	<p>Androgyny, queer sexual identities, polymorphous sexuality, mass marketing of pornography, porn style mixing with mainstream images.</p>
<p>The book as sufficient bearer of the word. The library as complete and total system for printed knowledge.</p>	<p>Hypermedia as transcendence of the physical limits of print media. The Web as infinitely expandable, centerless, interconnected information system.</p>
<p>Hierarchy, order, centralized control.</p>	<p>Subverted order, loss of centralized control, fragmentation.</p>