# Unit 6: The Postmodern Turn

### Introduction to Postmodernism and the Death of the Author

## Unit Student Learning Objectives

### Unit 6: The Postmodern Turn

At the end of this unit, students will be able to:

1. Identify artists and describe qualities associated with postmodernism (Course Goals: 1,2,4,5, GE: 1,4,6,7, Core skills: A, D, E)
2. Define key terms associated with postmodernism (Course Goals: 1,2,4 GE: 1,4,6,7, core skills: A, D, E)
3. Question the theory and philosophy behind the movement, with emphasis on Saussure and Barthes. (Course Goals: 2,3,4,5,6 GE: 1,4,6,7,9 core skills: A, B, C, E, F, G)

### Artists covered:

Artworks from the first half of the semester will be presented for review, and artworks from the second half will be previewed, but no new artists or artworks will be required for memorization.

## Unit Student Assessments & Activities

### Introduction (ULO 3-4)

This being the last unit before the midterm brings us to post-modernism, something you hear a lot when talking about contemporary art. It can mean a lot of different things, so we are going to focus on some of the key concepts it covers.

**Appropriation**

Appropriation is the act of taking something that already exists out in the world and reusing it in a way that creates new meaning. It covers everything from the image of a Coke bottle as we saw with Andy Warhol to the sampling that is so common in music today. Appropriation today is almost as important as paint was in the 1950s, so we take a bit of time to examine this phenomenon.

**Self-Referentiality**

Self-Referentiality as we break it down today, means "being in the state of referring to oneself", which may sound like a strange thing for an artwork to do. In the slideshows, I give a mini history lesson of this concept, and end with several examples from contemporary art that we will see again in the second half of the course. I also have a couple videos links for you to explore this idea in popular film.

**Saussure’s Semiotics:**

Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist, and he used what we call structuralism to look at how language works. He said elements of language can be called SIGNS. Every SIGN is a combination of two things: the SIGNIFIER (the image or the sound of the word) and the SIGNIFIED (the mental association we have when we read or hear the word). This is interesting to us, because these ideas have been extended to the visual arts, where elements of pictures are seen as signifiers, and to understand the work, we must decode what is signified.

**Barthes’ Myth:**

Roland Barthes was one of a group of French philosophers known to us as post-structuralism. They took the ideas of Saussure and applied them in new and interesting ways. One of Barthe’s ideas was to take the idea of the SIGN-SIGNIFIER-SIGNIFIED, and to apply it to the concept of Myths. He explained how additional meaning is culturally heaped upon certain signs in order to elevate them to the status of myth. He uses wine in French society as one example. Wine to the French is much more than just an alcoholic beverage. Even we as Americans have our own perceptions and stereotypes associated with the French and Wine, don’t we? In class we follow the example of the American flag as a myth, and look at many of the places where the American flag shows up in our semester.

**Barthes' Death of the Author:**

We will read this text, also by Roland Barthes, which examines how we are to read a work of art. He argues that it is the reader of a novel, or the viewer of a painting, who gets to decide what the true meaning in the work is.

The lesson plan is a little different this week, so be sure to check out all the material in order to plan ahead. There is no chapter from the book this week, but the reading is one of the tougher ones to get through so don't leave it until the last minute. Also the discussion forum comes with it's own material, so make sure to start digesting that section well before the posting deadline. It's a little more ambitious of a question this time, and there's a lot of theory to digest this week, so the first posting is due on Saturday, and the responses, as usual, on Sunday.

### Textbook : No textbook this week.

There is no textbook chapter to read this week. Instead take the time to read "The Death of the Author" and study for the next week's midterm.

### **Readings**: (ULO 3, 4)

### Roland Barthes "Death Of The Author"

#### Introduction

Roland Barthes makes a lot of references in this reading to literary works that even I haven't read. Don't get overwhelmed by the references he makes, just try to understand what he is saying about the novels. Barthes is talking about Authors in a way that is focused on writers, but for our class, and postmodernism in general, we can think of "Author" as synonymous with "Artist", and "Text" to mean any "Artwork" including painting, sculpture, a photograph, music, you name it.

If you are interested, you can find the [original tranlation here](http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/barthes06.htm) and [another translation by the same translator here](http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf)(as if just to prove that there is no one author or even one text!)

#### Main Points

Before we begin, I want to outline the most important points to look for in this article:

* Any artwork can be read as a “Text”.
* There is no one single “Author” for a “Text”.
* Instead, any Text is a mixture of quotations from other sources.
* The idea of an "Author", someone who creates a work out of this air, is no longer valid. We must think of artists as "scriptors", assembling artworks out of a collection of appropriated experiences.
* It is the responsibility of the Reader to decide the real meanings of the Text.

#### "Death of the Author" — translated by Richard Howard

In his story Sarrasine Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: 'This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.' Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.

No doubt it has always been that way. As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. The sense of this phenomenon, however, has varied; in ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose 'performance' - the mastery of the narrative code -may possibly be admired but never his 'genius'. The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism,

French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'. It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author. The author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us.

Though the sway of the Author remains powerful (the new criticism has often done no more than consolidate it), it goes without saying that certain writers have long since attempted to loosen it. In France, Mallarme was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'. Mallarme's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing (which is, as will be seen, to restore the place of the reader). Valery, encumbered by a psychology of the Ego, considerably diluted Mallarme's theory but, his taste for classicism leading him to turn to the lessons of rhetoric, he never stopped calling into question and deriding the Author; he stressed the linguistic and, as it were, 'hazardous' nature of his activity, and throughout his prose works he militated in favour of the essentially verbal condition of literature, in the face of which all recourse to the writer's interiority seemed to him pure superstition. Proust himself, despite the apparently psychological character of what are called his analyses, was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation between the writer and his characters; by making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but he who is going to write (the young man in the novel - but, in fact, how old is he and who is he? - wants to write but cannot; the novel ends when writing at last becomes possible), Proust gave modern writing its epic. By a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained, he made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model; so that it is clear to us that Charlus does not imitate Montesquiou but that Montesquiou - in his anecdotal, historical reality - is no more than a secondary fragment, derived from Charlus. Lastly, to go no further than this prehistory of modernity, Surrealism, though unable to accord language a supreme place (language being system and the aim of the movement being, romantically, a direct subversion of codes-itself moreover illusory: a code cannot be destroyed, only 'played off'), contributed to the desacrilization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning (the famous surrealist 'jolt'), by entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of (automatic writing), by accepting the principle and the experience of several people writing together. Leaving aside literature itself (such distinctions really becoming invalid), linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by show ing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.

The removal of the Author (one could talk here with Brecht of a veritable 'distancing', the Author diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage) is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text (or - which is the same thing -the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent). The temporality is different. The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now. The fact is (or, it follows) that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered-something like the I declare of kings or the I sing of very ancient poets. Having buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely 'polish' his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin-or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pecuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely; something experienced in exemplary fashion by the young Thomas de Quincey, he who was so good at Greek that in order to translate absolutely modern ideas and images into that dead language, he had, so Baudelaire tells us (in Paradis Artificiels), 'created for himself an unfailing dictionary, vastly more extensive and complex than those resulting from the ordinary patience of purely literary themes'. Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'- victory to the critic. Hence there is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic, nor again in the fact that criticism (be it new) is today undermined, along with the Author. In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases-reason, science, law.

Let us come back to the Balzac sentence. No one, no 'person', says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of the writing, which is reading. Another-very precise- example will help to make this clear: recent research (J.-P. Vernant) has demonstrated the constitutively ambiguous nature of Greek tragedy, its texts being woven from words with double meanings that each character understands unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is exactly the 'tragic'); there is, however, someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him-this someone being precisely the reader (or here, the listener). Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. Which is why it is derisory to condemn the new writing in the name of a humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader's rights. Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

### Presentation: Artist Slideshows (ULO 1-4)

Please watch the following slideshows:

* [Unit 6-1: Appropriation](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit06-01.Appropriation.pptx)
* [Unit 6-2: Self Referentiality](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit06-02.SelfReferentiality.pptx)
* [Unit 6-3: Semiotics](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit06-03.Semiotics.pptx)
* [Unit 6-4: Semiotics Part 2](http://jonathangabel.com/documents/art125/ppt/Art125Unit06-04.Semiotics2.pptx)

### Presentations: Artist Videos (ULO 1-4)

Please watch the following videos:

#### George Méliès: L'homme orchestre (One man Band)

The first film I know of that uses multiplicity, or that 'mirror hall' self-referentiality effect. It's more of a film-specific magic trick here, but to give you perspective on history of the next films:

#### Buster Keaton's "The Playhouse"

A little later in the silent era. One of the title cards is particularly self-referential, extra credit if you spot it.

#### Bruce Lee Mirror Scene from "Enter the Dragon"

The "self-referential" scene starts at 2:30, but are you really going to skip the part where Bruce Lee tastes his own blood? Notice the music as soon as he enters the mirror room, what psychological state does this scene try to create?

#### Being John Malkovich

If you haven't seen the movie yet, do what you need to to watch Being John Malkovich this week. (It's available on instant watch on Netflix.) If you can't get to it, this is the scene where (--spoiler alert--) John Malkovich enters a portal that dumps him into his own head:

### Interactive activities: artwork identification, and terminology (multiple chances, self assess)(ULO 1, 2)

#### Multiple Choice Definitions

Q:What is Appropriation? A.Appropriation is the act of taking something that already exists out in the world and reusing it in a way that creates new meaning. B.Appropriation is the study of signs. C.Appropriation is being aware of and referring to the self. D.Appropriation is the use of satire. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q:What does Self-Referentiality mean? A.Self-Referentiality is being aware of and referring to oneself. B.Self-Referentiality is the study of signs. C.Self-Referentiality is when the signifier refers back to the sign. D.Self-Referentiality is the study of the Myth of the self. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q:What is Semiotics? A.Semiotics is the study of signs. B.Semiotics is the study of Myth. C.Semiotics is the study of self-referentiality. D.Semiotics is the study of the Author. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q:What does Saussure say about signs? A.He says all language is made up of signs, each of which has both a signifier and a signified. B.He says Myths are made out of the signs, which in tern signify a cultural belief. C.He says signs are how self-referentiality refers back to the self. D.He says signs act as the signifier to the signified. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q:What does Roland Barthes say about signs? A.He says Myths are made out of the signs, which in tern signify a cultural belief. B.He says all language is made up of signs, each of which has both a signifier and a signified. C.He says the signified is a combination of the signifier and the sign. D.He said we navigate the world through the context of signs. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q:What does Barthes say about the Death of the Author? A.It is the reader of a work of art who determines its meaning, not the author. B.It is the birth of the scriptor that requires the death of the author. C.With the death of God, the Author must also die. D.The Author must bring the signifier together with the signified. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

Q:What metaphors does Barthes use for the idea of author and of scriptor? A.The Author gives birth to a book, the scriptor assembles it out of cultural quotations. B.It is the birth of the scriptor that requires the death of the author. C.The Author like a Greek Philosopher, the scriptor is like God.  
D.The Author assembles the book, the scriptor determines it's meaning. ANSWER: A POINTS: 5 TYPE: MC

### Discussion Board Question relating to slideshows and readings (ULO 1-4)

Now that you have become familiar with the artists and concepts presented in this unit, it is time to start making connections. Here is your chance to apply what you learned in the readings to some of the artwork you have seen.

**First**, you will start a thread by answering the Essay question below.

**Then** you will reply to at least two (2) other students posts to get the discussion going.

Please make sure you meet the **due dates** for these posts.

#### Essay Question:

Examine the material related to the following two albums:

## Brother Ali: Mourning in America and Dreaming in Color, released 9/18/12

Album Cover:

Mourning in America

Mourning in America

Article written by Brother Ali: [The Intersection of Homophobia and Hip Hop](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brother-ali/hip-hop-homophobia-_b_1864676.html)

"Mourning in America":

You can also [stream the album](http://www.youtube.com/embed/vLC4xqPUkLs)

## Lupe Fiasco: Food & Liquor II: the Great American Rap Album Part 1, relaseed 9/25/12

Cover from single (album cover is all black):

Food & Liquor II

Food & Liquor II

Watch this interview with [Lupe Fiasco on The Colbert Report](http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/news/id.15062/title.lupe-fiasco-clarifies-his-political-views-on-the-colbert-report)

"Strange Fruition" -- the rest of the album is also [available on youtube](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=lupe+fiasco+food+liquor+2)

Now, this is your turn to really apply what you have learned in the first half of the semester. You can make references to any artists or ideas discussed in the previous units, or reference any outside source material.

Assess the message presented by one or both of these artists. You can focus on their visual materials, music, lyrics, or ideas presented in interviews or writings. Whether your are critical or complimentary is immaterial, but make sure to use the principals discussed in this lesson on postmodernism to decode their work.

You can look for instances of self referentiality, decode the work in terms of signs or myth, or discuss their work in relation to the death of the author. Make sure to plan out your response and check your grammar and spelling (I'm giving you until Saturday to make your first post). It may help to write your response as a text document first and then copy and paste. But most of all be creative and have fun!

### Additional Artists to Study (ULO 1)

*You will not be tested on the following material, but if you are interested in studying further anything we discussed this week, these are the artworks you saw in the slideshows*

* Jeff Koons, Michael Jackson and Bubbles, 1988
* Robert Colescott, George Washington Carver Crossing the Deleware, 1977
* Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, Washington Crossing the Delaware, 1851
* Betye Saar, Liberation of Aunt Jemima, 1972
* Fred Wilson, Guarded View, 1991
* Tom Sachs, Chanel Chain Saw, 1996
* Vic Muniz, Che Guevara
* Arturo Herrera, All I Ask, 1999
* Robert Morris, Box For Standing, 1961
* Marc Quinn, Self, 1991
* Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917
* René Magritte, The Treason of Images, 1928
* Italo Calvino, If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler, 1979
* Bruce Nauman, Beside Yourself Behind Yourself, 1989
* Wendy McMurdo, Helen Backstage Merlin Theatre, 1996
* Juan Muñoz, Many Times (Detail), 1999p
* Yue Minjun, Untitled, 2005
* Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, Washington Crossing the Delaware, 1851
* Faith Ringgold, Flag For the Moon, 1967–69
* Jasper Johns, Flag, 1954
* Jasper Johns, White Flag, 1955
* Hans Haacke, Stargazing, 2005
* Jean-Marc Bouju, Iraqi Prisoner, 2003
* images Reuters/AP September 11, 2012 Cairo Egypt

### Optional links for further self-study (ULO 1-4)

*You will not be tested on the following material, but if you are interested in studying further anything we discussed this week, these links are a good place to start:*

* [Why was I not informed about Bruce Lee?](http://www.theonion.com/articles/why-was-i-not-informed-about-bruce-lee,11309/)