THE IDEA OF THE POSTMODERN (A history)

by Hans Bertens · Language: EN

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Overview

Hans Bertens' "The Idea of the Postmodern (A History)" offers a comprehensive intellectual history of postmodernism, tracing its origins, development, and eventual critiques across various disciplines. Bertens meticulously charts how the term emerged from architectural discourse in the mid-20th century, subsequently migrating and transforming within literary criticism, philosophy, and cultural theory. The book is not an advocacy for or against postmodernism, but rather an analytical survey that seeks to clarify the often-conflicting definitions and applications of the concept, from its early proponents like Ihab Hassan and Charles Jencks to its more complex philosophical articulations by figures such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard.

Bertens argues that postmodernism is not a monolithic theory but a constellation of ideas and attitudes that challenged the foundational assumptions of modernism, particularly its belief in grand narratives, universal truths, and objective reason. He explores how postmodern thought engaged with issues of language, power, identity, and representation, influencing fields from feminism and postcolonial studies to art and media theory. The book's significance lies in its ability to provide a coherent narrative of a notoriously elusive and contested intellectual movement, making it accessible to both students and scholars. By historicizing postmodernism, Bertens illuminates its profound impact on late 20th-century thought and culture, while also addressing the debates surrounding its perceived 'end' and enduring legacy.

Key Takeaways

- Postmodernism is not a single, unified theory but a diverse and often contradictory set of ideas that evolved over several decades.
- The concept of postmodernism originated in architecture before expanding into literary criticism, philosophy, and broader cultural theory.
- Key figures like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault significantly shaped the philosophical understanding of postmodernism by challenging modernist grand narratives and universal truths.
- Postmodern thought critically examines the relationship between language, power, and knowledge, often highlighting the constructed nature of reality and identity.

• The 'end' of postmodernism is a complex debate, with some arguing for its demise and others asserting its continued influence in contemporary critical thought.

• Understanding postmodernism requires appreciating its historical context, as it developed in response to the perceived failures and limitations of modernism.

• Bertens' work provides a valuable framework for navigating the intricate intellectual landscape of postmodernism without taking a polemical stance.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: What is Postmodernism?

This introductory section sets the stage for the historical survey of postmodernism. Bertens outlines the inherent difficulties in defining the term, acknowledging its contested nature and diverse applications across disciplines. He introduces the book's methodology, which traces the concept's evolution from its earliest appearances to its various theoretical and cultural manifestations. The introduction emphasizes that postmodernism is not a monolithic phenomenon but a complex set of ideas and practices that challenge modernist assumptions about progress, truth, and universal narratives. It prepares the reader for a journey through the intellectual landscape that shaped and was shaped by postmodern thought, highlighting the book's aim to provide a comprehensive, yet critical, historical account.

Part I: The Prehistory of the Postmodern

This part delves into the origins and early uses of the term "postmodern," predating its widespread theoretical articulation. Bertens explores figures like Arnold Toynbee, who used "post-modern" to describe a new historical era following the modern, and C. Wright Mills, who discussed a "post-modern mood" in the mid-20th century. He also examines literary critics such as Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler, who identified a shift in sensibility in American literature away from high modernism's seriousness towards a more playful, ironic, and often subversive mode. This section establishes that the idea of a "postmodern" was circulating in various intellectual and cultural spheres before it became a dominant theoretical paradigm, laying the groundwork for its later philosophical and critical development.

Part II: The Postmodern in France

This crucial section focuses on the foundational contributions of French thinkers to postmodern theory. Bertens meticulously analyzes the work of Jean-François Lyotard, particularly his seminal "The Postmodern Condition," which famously defined postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" and explored the impact of technology and information on knowledge. He also discusses Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, Michel Foucault's genealogies of power/knowledge, and Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulacra and hyperreality, which profoundly influenced understandings of representation, truth, and consumer culture. This part highlights how these French theorists challenged Enlightenment rationality, universal truths, and the stability of

meaning, providing the philosophical bedrock for much of subsequent postmodern discourse.

Part III: The Postmodern in America

Bertens shifts focus to the reception and development of postmodern thought in the United States. This part examines the work of Fredric Jameson, whose Marxist critique in "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" argued that postmodernism is the cultural dominant of a new phase of capitalism, characterized by pastiche, depthlessness, and the effacement of history. Richard Rorty's pragmatic philosophy, which questioned foundationalism and emphasized contingency, is also discussed for its resonance with postmodern skepticism. The section further explores the emergence of cultural studies, identity politics, and the debates surrounding multiculturalism and relativism, demonstrating how postmodern ideas intersected with American academic and political discourse, particularly concerning issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

Part IV: Postmodernism and the Arts

This part explores the manifestations of postmodernism across various artistic and cultural forms. Bertens examines postmodern architecture, characterized by its rejection of modernist purity, its embrace of eclecticism, historical quotation, and often playful ornamentation, citing figures like Robert Venturi. He then turns to literature, discussing authors who employ metafiction, intertextuality, fragmentation, and a blurring of high and low culture, challenging traditional narrative structures and authorial authority. The section also touches upon visual arts, performance, and popular culture, illustrating how postmodern aesthetics questioned originality, authenticity, and the boundaries between art and everyday life, often through irony, pastiche, and the appropriation of existing forms.

Part V: The End of the Postmodern?

The final part addresses the critiques of postmodernism and the debates surrounding its decline or transformation. Bertens discusses various arguments that proclaimed the "end" of postmodernism, examining the rise of new theoretical paradigms and terms like "post-postmodernism," "altermodernism," or "metamodernism." He explores criticisms regarding postmodernism's perceived relativism, political quietism, and its alleged inability to offer constructive alternatives. This section also reflects on the lasting legacy of postmodern thought, acknowledging its profound impact on critical theory, cultural studies, and the humanities, even as its specific historical moment might have passed. It concludes by considering the ongoing relevance of its questions about truth, power, and representation in contemporary society.

Themes

- Intellectual history
- Postmodern theory

- Cultural critique
- Philosophy of language
- Modernism vs. Postmodernism

Notable Quotes

- "The postmodern is not a single, unified phenomenon but a cluster of often contradictory ideas and practices." — Bertens frequently reiterates this point throughout the book to emphasize the complexity of his subject matter, particularly in the introduction and conclusion.
- "Postmodernism, in its most influential theoretical articulations, challenged the very possibility of grand narratives and universal truths." — This statement encapsulates a core argument about the philosophical thrust of postmodernism, especially when discussing Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault.
- "The shift from modernism to postmodernism can be understood as a move from a belief in progress and foundational certainty to an embrace of contingency, plurality, and irony." — Bertens uses this to characterize the fundamental intellectual and cultural transition he is tracing, particularly in the early chapters comparing the two eras.
- "To write a history of the postmodern is to write a history of its various definitions and the debates surrounding them." — This reflects Bertens' methodological approach as stated in the introduction, highlighting that the book is about the idea of the postmodern, not a definitive statement on what it is.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is THE IDEA OF THE POSTMODERN (A history) about?

The book is a comprehensive intellectual history of postmodernism, tracing its origins in architecture, its development through literary criticism and philosophy, and its impact on various academic disciplines. Hans Bertens explores the key thinkers and debates that shaped the concept, analyzing its evolving definitions and its challenges to modernist thought, without taking a polemical stance.

Is THE IDEA OF THE POSTMODERN (A history) worth reading?

Yes, it is highly recommended for anyone seeking a clear and thorough understanding of postmodernism. Bertens provides an accessible yet rigorous account of a complex and often misunderstood intellectual movement. It's an excellent resource for students and scholars alike, offering a balanced historical perspective that clarifies the diverse ideas associated with the term.

How does THE IDEA OF THE POSTMODERN (A history) end?

Spoiler: The book concludes by examining the debates surrounding the 'end' of postmodernism, discussing arguments for its demise or transformation. Bertens ultimately suggests that while the term itself may have faded from popular academic discourse, its core tenets and critical approaches have been absorbed into contemporary thought, leaving a lasting and significant legacy on how we understand culture, knowledge, and power.

Who should read THE IDEA OF THE POSTMODERN (A history)?

This book is ideal for students of literary theory, philosophy, cultural studies, and intellectual history. Scholars looking for a comprehensive overview of postmodernism's development will also find it invaluable. Anyone interested in understanding the intellectual currents that shaped the late 20th century will benefit from Bertens' clear and detailed historical account.

How long does it take to read THE IDEA OF THE POSTMODERN (A history)?

Given its academic nature and depth, reading "The Idea of the Postmodern" typically takes around 10-12 hours (600-720 minutes) for a focused reader. This estimate accounts for the need to engage with complex philosophical concepts and historical context, which often requires a slower reading pace than popular non-fiction.

Questions & Answers

What is the primary aim of Hans Bertens' 'The Idea of the Postmodern'?

Bertens' primary aim is to provide a comprehensive historical and intellectual survey of postmodernism. He traces its origins, development, and various manifestations across philosophy, literature, and critical theory, from the mid-20th century onwards. The book seeks to clarify the complex and often contradictory ideas associated with the term, offering a structured narrative of how the 'idea' of the postmodern evolved and was debated among key thinkers.

How does Bertens distinguish between modernism and postmodernism?

Bertens distinguishes modernism as largely characterized by a belief in progress, universal truths, and the potential for art and reason to create a better world, often through formal experimentation. Postmodernism, in contrast, is presented as a skeptical reaction to these modernist ideals, questioning grand narratives, universal reason, and objective truth. It emphasizes fragmentation, relativism, pastiche, and a heightened awareness of language's role in constructing reality, often blurring the lines between high and low culture.

Which key philosophers does Bertens identify as precursors to postmodern thought?

Bertens identifies several key philosophical precursors, notably Friedrich Nietzsche, for his critique of truth, morality, and objective knowledge, and Martin Heidegger, for his questioning of Western metaphysics and emphasis on language and being. He also points to figures like Ferdinand de Saussure, whose linguistic theories laid groundwork for structuralism and

post-structuralism, which are central to postmodern thought's focus on language and meaning-making.

What role does Jean-François Lyotard play in Bertens' account of postmodernism?

Jean-François Lyotard is central to Bertens' account, particularly through his influential work 'The Postmodern Condition.' Lyotard is presented as defining postmodernism primarily as an 'incredulity toward metanarratives' – a skepticism towards overarching explanatory systems like progress, enlightenment, or emancipation. Bertens explains how Lyotard's focus on language games, local narratives, and the performativity of knowledge became a foundational aspect of understanding postmodernism, especially in its philosophical dimension.

How does Bertens discuss the concept of 'grand narratives' or 'metanarratives'?

Bertens extensively discusses grand narratives as the large-scale stories or ideologies (e.g., the Enlightenment, Marxism, Christianity) that have historically legitimized knowledge and social institutions. He explains that postmodernism, particularly through Lyotard, challenges and rejects these metanarratives, viewing them as oppressive, exclusionary, and ultimately unsustainable. This 'incredulity' is presented as a defining characteristic of the postmodern intellectual landscape, leading to a focus on local, fragmented, and provisional truths.

What is the significance of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction in the context of postmodernism as presented by Bertens?

Bertens highlights Derrida's deconstruction as a crucial method within postmodern thought. Deconstruction, as explained by Bertens, involves meticulously analyzing texts to expose the inherent contradictions, hierarchies, and unstable meanings within them. It reveals how language operates through binary oppositions that are never truly stable, thereby undermining claims to definitive meaning or objective truth. This process demonstrates the constructed nature of reality and knowledge, aligning with postmodern skepticism towards fixed interpretations.

How does Bertens address the relationship between postmodernism and capitalism?

Bertens addresses the relationship between postmodernism and capitalism, particularly through the work of Fredric Jameson. He explains Jameson's argument that postmodernism is the 'cultural logic of late capitalism,' suggesting that the fragmentation, pastiche, and depthlessness characteristic of postmodern culture are direct reflections of the economic and social conditions of advanced consumer capitalism. This perspective views postmodernism not just as an aesthetic style but as an intrinsic part of a specific historical stage of economic development.

What are some of the main criticisms of postmodernism that Bertens explores?

Bertens explores various criticisms, including accusations of relativism, nihilism, and a lack of ethical or political commitment. Critics argue that by dismantling grand narratives and universal truths, postmodernism leaves no ground for moral judgment or collective action. He also

discusses concerns that postmodernism's focus on language and discourse can lead to an inability to address real-world material conditions, and that its celebration of fragmentation can undermine efforts towards social justice or historical understanding.

How does Bertens explain the concept of 'simulacra' as developed by Jean Baudrillard?

Bertens explains Baudrillard's concept of simulacra as copies without an original, where the distinction between reality and its representation collapses. He details how Baudrillard argues that in postmodern society, media and signs no longer represent reality but instead create a 'hyperreality' that is more real than the real itself. This leads to a world dominated by simulations, where authentic experience is replaced by mediated images, profoundly impacting our understanding of truth, history, and identity.

What is Frederic Jameson's contribution to the understanding of postmodernism according to Bertens?

According to Bertens, Fredric Jameson's primary contribution is his Marxist analysis of postmodernism as a cultural dominant intrinsically linked to late capitalism. Jameson argues that postmodernism is not merely a style but a historical period's cultural expression, characterized by a loss of historicity, depthlessness, and a pervasive sense of pastiche. Bertens details how Jameson's work provides a critical framework for understanding postmodern aesthetics and philosophy as symptoms of specific economic and social conditions.

How does Bertens trace the evolution of postmodernism from a philosophical concept to a cultural phenomenon?

Bertens traces this evolution by first examining its philosophical roots in critiques of Enlightenment reason and metaphysics by thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. He then moves to its theoretical articulation by figures such as Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault, who questioned grand narratives and objective truth. Subsequently, he shows how these philosophical ideas permeated literary theory, art, architecture, and popular culture, manifesting as specific aesthetic styles, critical practices, and a general cultural sensibility characterized by irony, pastiche, and skepticism.

What is the 'linguistic turn' and how does it relate to postmodernism in Bertens' analysis?

Bertens explains the 'linguistic turn' as a fundamental shift in 20th-century thought, where language became the central focus of philosophical inquiry, rather than consciousness or objective reality. He shows how this turn, influenced by Saussure, led to the understanding that language doesn't just describe reality but actively constructs it. For postmodernism, this means that truth, meaning, and even identity are always mediated and shaped by linguistic structures and discourses, making them inherently unstable and relative.

Does Bertens present a unified definition of postmodernism, or does he emphasize its diversity?

Bertens explicitly emphasizes the diversity and often contradictory nature of postmodernism rather than offering a single, unified definition. He highlights that 'postmodernism' encompasses a wide array of philosophical positions, artistic practices, and critical theories that often disagree with each other. His approach is to map out this complex intellectual landscape, showing the various 'ideas' that have been grouped under the postmodern umbrella, acknowledging its fluidity and resistance to easy categorization.

How does Bertens discuss the impact of postmodernism on literature and art?

Bertens discusses postmodernism's profound impact on literature and art through its characteristic features like intertextuality, pastiche, metafiction, and the blurring of genre boundaries. He explains how postmodern artists and writers often challenge traditional notions of authorship, originality, and narrative coherence, frequently incorporating irony, self-reflexivity, and a playful engagement with history and popular culture. This leads to works that question representation itself and invite readers/viewers to actively participate in meaning-making.

What is the 'crisis of representation' in postmodern thought, as explained by Bertens?

Bertens explains the 'crisis of representation' as a core postmodern concern, stemming from the belief that language and other sign systems cannot accurately or transparently represent reality. This crisis suggests that our access to the 'real' is always mediated and distorted by cultural, linguistic, and ideological frameworks. It leads to skepticism about objective truth and the possibility of direct knowledge, emphasizing instead the constructed nature of all representations and the inherent instability of meaning.

What is the main argument Bertens makes about the 'end' or 'aftermath' of postmodernism?

Bertens argues that while the intense theoretical debates and cultural dominance of postmodernism may have waned, its legacy and influence persist. He suggests that we are not necessarily 'post-postmodern' but rather living in an 'aftermath' where many postmodern insights—such as skepticism towards grand narratives, awareness of constructed realities, and the importance of discourse—have become integrated into contemporary thought. He avoids declaring a definitive end, instead focusing on its transformation and continued relevance.

What does Bertens mean by 'the idea' of the postmodern in his title?

By 'the idea' of the postmodern, Bertens refers to the evolving and contested conceptual framework that has been used to understand a range of philosophical, cultural, and artistic phenomena. It signifies not a single, fixed entity, but rather a complex, dynamic, and often contradictory set of intellectual currents, debates, and interpretations. His book aims to historicize and clarify this multifaceted 'idea' rather than to endorse or define a singular 'postmodernism' as a monolithic reality.

How does Bertens engage with the concept of historical progress in relation to postmodernism?

Bertens shows that postmodernism largely rejects the Enlightenment concept of linear historical progress. He explains that postmodern thinkers often critique the idea that history moves towards a predetermined, better future, viewing such narratives as ideological constructs that legitimize power structures. Instead, postmodernism emphasizes discontinuity, rupture, and the subjective interpretation of the past, often through a lens of skepticism towards any overarching historical teleology or universal human destiny.

What is the relationship between power and knowledge in postmodernism, as discussed by Bertens?

Bertens extensively discusses the postmodern understanding of power and knowledge, particularly through the work of Michel Foucault. He explains that postmodernism sees power not just as repressive but as productive, shaping what counts as knowledge and truth. Knowledge is never neutral but always embedded within power relations, and discourses are mechanisms through which power operates. This perspective challenges the idea of objective knowledge, revealing how 'truth' is often a product of specific power configurations.

Spoiler: How does Bertens conclude his historical survey of the postmodern?

Spoiler: Bertens concludes by reflecting on the enduring legacy and transformation of postmodernism rather than its definitive end. He suggests that while the term itself may have lost some of its critical edge and the intense debates of its heyday have subsided, many of its core insights—such as skepticism towards universal truths, the constructed nature of reality, and the importance of discourse—have become deeply embedded in contemporary thought. He posits that we are living in an 'aftermath' where postmodernism's influence continues to shape our understanding of culture, knowledge, and society.