

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: The Problem of Definition

Bertens opens by acknowledging the inherent difficulty in defining postmodernism, a term fraught with ambiguity and conflicting interpretations. He outlines his approach: not to offer a definitive definition, but to trace the historical development of the concept across various disciplines. This chapter sets the stage for a historical inquiry into how the 'idea' of the postmodern emerged, transformed, and was debated, emphasizing its contested nature from the outset and the need for a contextual understanding.

Part I: The Prehistory of the Postmodern

This section delves into the intellectual precursors and conditions that paved the way for postmodernism. Bertens examines the internal critiques within modernism itself, particularly its disillusionment with progress and reason after two world wars. He discusses figures like Nietzsche and Heidegger, whose philosophical challenges to foundationalism and metaphysics laid crucial groundwork for later postmodern thought, highlighting how their ideas questioned the very premises of Western modernity and enlightenment.

Part II: The Emergence of the Postmodern

Bertens traces the first explicit uses of 'postmodern' to architectural discourse in the 1960s, where it signified a break from the functionalism and utopianism of modern architecture. He then explores its migration into literary criticism through figures like Ihab Hassan and Leslie Fiedler, who identified a new sensibility characterized by irony, pastiche, and a blurring of high and low culture. This chapter illustrates the initial, often celebratory, articulation of the postmodern as a distinct cultural phase.

Part III: French Theory and the Postmodern

This crucial section focuses on the profound impact of French post-structuralist philosophy on the concept of postmodernism. Bertens meticulously explains the contributions of Jacques Derrida (deconstruction), Michel Foucault (power/knowledge), and Jean-François Lyotard (the critique of grand narratives). He details how these thinkers provided the theoretical apparatus for understanding postmodernism as a challenge to universal truths, objective reason, and the stability of meaning, fundamentally reshaping academic discourse.

Part IV: Postmodernism in America: Jameson and Baudrillard

Bertens examines how postmodernism was theorized and debated within American academic contexts, particularly through the work of Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. Jameson's analysis of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism is explored, emphasizing its relationship to consumerism and globalization. Baudrillard's ideas of simulacra and hyperreality are also discussed, illustrating how these theories addressed the changing nature of reality and representation in a media-saturated world, often with a more pessimistic outlook.

Part V: Postmodernism and Identity: Feminism and Postcolonialism

This chapter explores the intersection of postmodern thought with identity politics, specifically feminism and postcolonial theory. Bertens discusses how these movements utilized and critiqued postmodern concepts to challenge essentialist notions of gender, race, and nation. He highlights how postmodernism's skepticism towards universal narratives provided tools for deconstructing dominant power structures and advocating for marginalized voices, while also noting the tensions and criticisms from within these movements regarding postmodernism's relativism.

Part VI: The End of the Postmodern?

Bertens addresses the widespread debates surrounding the 'end' of postmodernism, examining arguments that declared its demise or transition into new intellectual paradigms. He explores various critiques, including those from a renewed interest in ethics, realism, or a 'new sincerity.' This chapter analyzes whether postmodernism truly concluded or if its core tenets have simply been absorbed and transformed into contemporary thought, suggesting a complex legacy rather than an abrupt termination.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Postmodern

In the concluding chapter, Bertens synthesizes the historical trajectory of postmodernism, reflecting on its enduring impact and its place in intellectual history. He argues that despite its contested nature and declarations of its end, postmodernism fundamentally altered how we understand knowledge, power, and culture. The book concludes by emphasizing that the 'idea of the postmodern' remains a crucial lens through which to analyze contemporary society, even as new theoretical frameworks emerge.

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.