Postmodernism signifies a general term used to refer to transformations, developments, and aesthetic tendencies which have been taking place in literature, music, architecture, and philosophy since 1945. Even though postmodernism arose as a response to high modernism, many critics have argued that postmodernism may be best understood as both a continuation of and a break with the modernist aesthetic tradition. Fredric Jameson, for example, one of the most prominent American critics of postmodernism, examines it as a particular aesthetic style and a historical condition marked by the emergence of the new economic order, or multinational capitalism which envelops the so-called post-industrial, consumer society, or the society of the media. Thus, by “postmodernism” most scholars mean both a historical period after World War II and aesthetic tendencies present in post-1945 art.

In terms of historical framework, the Holocaust and Hiroshima are often discussed as a “boundary” between modernism and postmodernism because, as some have argued, World War II delivered unhealable wounds to the Enlightenment notions of human rationality, perfectibility, progress, and civilization. The dominant characteristics of Western culture such as individualism, humanism, rationalism, a belief in social progress thanks to scientific discoveries, faith in knowledge, objective truth, and freedom are all being questioned and critiqued after World War II. In the United States, however, the social unrest of the 1960s is often perceived as the beginning of postmodernism. The Kennedy assassination, the horror of the Vietnam War, the rise of the so-called “counterculture,” student protests, the civil rights movement, and the women’s movement opened up a space for new cultural, philosophical, and literary productions which attempt to articulate the radically new social landscape of the United States, employing new aesthetic forms.

The characteristics of this new style in the arts are: blurring the boundary between high culture and pop culture, blurring between high art and
commercial forms, an assault upon traditional notions of the narrative, the employment of intertextuality (the self-conscious referencing of other texts), the use of pastiche (the drawing together of diverse forms into a single artwork), the ideological breakdown of the unitary character of American history, the emergence of multicultural and multiethnic voices in literature, the manifestation of gay and lesbian critical voices, the growing visibility of ethnic heterogeneity in various cultural productions, and the penetration of culture by advertising, television, and other media. In philosophy and critical theory ("theory" itself being a new phenomenon understood as an area of study which draws on discourses from such disciplines as philosophy, history, anthropology, political science, psychology, and literary criticism, among others), the engagement of postmodernist discourse refers to numerous theoretical preoccupations: the questioning of traditional belief systems that historically rely on the notions of universality, transcendence, presence, "true self," and the desire for "origins;" the interrogation of cultural and discursive construction of the human identity, or subjectivity; the challenging of historically singular and fixed concepts like Truth, Meaning, Morality, and History, and investigating them as contextual sociocultural constructions; the attention to language and the way it mediates the relation between human identity and the world (language being understood not as a stable and transparent "tool" of communication, but rather as an ever-evolving process of signification which is inseparable from the human body which speaks it); the focus on the inherent instability of meaning and the impossibility to "fix" meaning and interpretation; the idea that presence is constituted by absence, i.e. the notion that meaning is produced by visible as well as invisible elements (or to put it simply, what is not said is as important as what is being said), and the belief that every text is constructed on the basis of some exclusion; the critique of binary logic and ways in which historically dichotomous ways of thinking, or Eurocentric logic, have worked as discursive rationale for colonization, imperialism, domination, patriarchy, and racist discourses; the attention to cultural constructions of "otherness" ("other" being understood as a historically deprivileged category that stands in opposition to the normative idea of the human "I"); the discursive move from the notion of the "individual" (an idea of an autonomous, rational, coherent self that exists prior to language and shapes the world around itself independently from any historical and cultural forces) to the concept of the "subject" (identity constructed by history, social forces, culture, and discourses of power; a self that is an effect of linguistic practices).
In order to represent the range and complexity of issues that are central to the discourse of postmodernism, this module presents critical voices that not only discuss the notion of postmodernism per se, but also explore its theoretical intersections with other schools of thought, movements and methodologies such as poststructuralism, postcoloniality, feminism, and queer theory. Among well-known intellectuals that are often linked to the discussions surrounding the term postmodernism, the readers of this module will find introductions to the writings of Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, Ihab Hassan, Brian McHale, and Donna Haraway. While Baudrillard, Jameson, and Lyotard present engagements with Western philosophical traditions, Hassan and McHale offer their voices as literary critics and historians who comment on postmodernist literary practice. Haraway, on the other hand, a historian of science, presents her view of the postmodern culture from a feminist perspective of a scholar who is engaged in the critical explorations of a technological age of informatics.

Theorists and writers who may not be readily connected to the discussions of postmodernism but whose voices make significant contributions to the debates surrounding contemporary culture are bell hooks, Homi Bhabha, Hélène Cixous, and Gloria Anzaldúa. An African-American feminist cultural critic whose writings comment on diverse aesthetic forms such as literature, film, music, and visual art, hooks presents a critical stance toward mainstream postmodern theory and practice, looking at postmodernist discourse from the point of view of African-American culture and other minority voices. In his writing, Bhabha, often identified as a postcolonial scholar, reflects upon the political and ideological necessity of exploring the intersection of the postmodern and the postcolonial instead of conceiving of the two fields and modes of inquiry separately. His voice thus brings in the postcolonial perspective and allows readers to investigate the notion of postmodernism from the point of view of discourses of colonization and decolonization. Cixous, an influential French feminist thinker (and an author of a well-known “feminist manifesto,” “The Laugh of the Medusa”) brings in a poststructural feminist voice which discusses the contemporary cultural moment as a time of questioning of Western binaristic ways of thinking, being specifically interested in disputing the history of Western philosophical thought as a patriarchal discursive construct. Lastly, Anzaldúa, a lesbian Chicana writer and poet of the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border, engages the notion of “borderlands” to reflect upon contemporary culture
from the location of the colonized, disinherited, and marginal voices historically perceived as “others” in relation to the privileged notion of the “I.”

**SUGGESTED FURTHER READING**


