**Ironic or what? Five ways to spot a Postmodern TV show**

Postmodernism. It’s one of those frequently-used terms which is often applied to films or TV shows alongside adjectives such as ‘ironic’, ‘quirky’, self-conscious’, or just plain ‘weird’. It’s also generated a lot of theory and debate – not least about what the term actually means. Confused by the concept of Postmodernism? Freaked by textbooks or teachers telling you how ‘slippery’ the concept is before you’ve even got to grips with what it means? Here’s a simple way in:

*At its most basic, the term Postmodern applies to the ways in which new texts are constructed by making reference to, or ‘borrowing’ from, already existing ones. Think of the ways The Simpsons parodies films, TV genres, ideas and icons from popular culture, and you’re half-way there.*

This is, of course, only the beginning of the story. But to get to grips with the concept, here are five features of a TV text (or any other media text) which will help you to spot how Postmodernism actually works.

**Playfulness and self-reference**

With its self-referencing and breaking of the fourth wall, *Family Guy* is a great example of pastiche, parody and satire. Often referring to the constraints put upon the series by its own network, for example when Peter Griffin complains to the audience about the network stopping the show after its third series (before returning it by popular demand). Peter always referring to his cutaways, setting them up and thinking of ideas, is a way to not-so-subtly show that the series is hyperconscious and aware of its own medium. Family Guy doesn’t try to tell the audience that it’s real (although this would be difficult being as it’s animated!) instead it reminds the audience constantly that it is only an animated TV show in which anything can happen. Family Guy often uses current affairs and news stories, particularly about celebrities, to satirise the world around it and mock real-life day to day occurrences. The show has a knack of saying what everyone is thinking about certain things in a witty and cutting way, for example in one episode when they referred to HBO vampire series True Blood, Brian said ‘No one knows what that is’ to which Stewie replied ‘Rich gay people do’.

**Generic blurring and intertextuality**

*Bob’s Burgers*  constantly utilizes pop culture references to make the viewer feel like they are “smart” or “smarter” than those who don’t get the references. There are examples of this all throughout the series. In Season 3, Episode 2, it’s Halloween and Tina, Gene, and Louise are all dressed up and ready to go Trick-or-Treating. W hile the kids are getting ready to leave, Linda asks about everyone’s costumes. She sees Louise and says “Ooh, Wolverine! Scary!” and Louise says “I’m Edward Scissorhands.” Unless you’ve seen Edward Scissorhands and at least one X-Men movie or comic book, this joke won’t make any sense to you. On the opposite side, if you have seen or know of both of these references, you immediately feel rewarded for being “smart enough” to understand the joke. This can be referred to as cultural capital.

**Popular and commercial media meet ‘High Culture’**

Postmodern films and TV like to treat culture as a pick ‘n’ mix experience. The divisions between what was previously considered ‘High Culture’ (opera, classical drama and literature, fine art etc.) and those entertainment and commercial forms enjoyed by the so-called masses (pop music and video, advertising, mainstream film, computer games and most forms of television), are eroded, or played with.

There is no doubt that *The Simpsons* can be placed in the category of the postmodern. All of the rhetorical devices that are synonymous with postmodern theory are present in The Simpsons: pastiche, quotation, intertextuality and reflexivity. The Simpsons, because of the way it uses reflexivity and intertextuality in particular is a great example of the postmodern at work. The show is not intended to attract the same audiences as other cartoons, it provide a social commentary and is thus attractive to the sophisticated public. The Simpsons works in an interesting way as its form serves to encourage the consumption of popular culture. The show uses postmodern strategies to make political and social commentary in a way that is non-partisan and in a way that is appealing to the masses. The creators of the show clearly do not want to create divisions among its audiences.

**Fragmentation and the death of representation**

Postmodernism uses a range of fragments from other texts, genres and cultural influences; this ‘fragmentation’ also applies to representation. Some people argue that modern audiences are so used to reading media signs and messages through film, television, advertising and, most recently, the Internet, that reading media representations has become the dominant way of making sense of ‘reality’. In other words, we ‘read’ the world not through any essential first-hand knowledge or experience, but through media representations – which themselves increasingly refer to other representations. *Gogglebox* is a ‘reality’ TV show in which participants sit at home and watch TV, commenting on it all the while for our entertainment. Gogglebox celebrates the world of television and invites us to critically watch what’s on TV through the eyes of other people, so in a sense we are analysing TV through a TV show. We are being invited to watch a TV show about TV shows, it’s a TV show about its own medium that invites people, both participants and the viewers at home, to mock, laugh at and celebrate everything that comes to our screens at home. Gogglebox sounds like a bizarre TV show, watching people watch TV, but is actually strangely entertaining! And what is perhaps most ironic is that the armchair critics that participate in the show have gone on to become minor celebrities and the show itself is winning Television awards.

**Uncertainty and the loss of context**

All the above can result in a sense of uncertainty and the shaking up of previously understood beliefs and roles. Postmodern texts can make us feel that there are no generic rules any more, and that representations only refer to other representations. This can make us feel insecure. Postmodernist filmmakers challenge many aspects of life or belief systems which were once taken for granted. Notions like history, science, politics and even truth and identity come under the microscope.

*Breaking Bad* is a very different example of postmodernism. In this series, as many of you probably already know, Walter White is a chemistry teacher at a high school, and he also works at a car wash. As a result of working at the car wash without proper safety precautions being taken, Walter ends up getting lung cancer. Also, his wife Skyler is pregnant with their second child. Walter doesn't make very much money and qu ickly realizes that the cancer is terminal and he isn't going to be able to leave enough money for his family to survive without him. His brother-in-law, Hank, is a DEA agent, and after seeing a meth bust on television, Walter asks to accompany Hank on one of their meth busts. Long story short, Walter ends up finding one of his former students, Jesse Pink man, who also cooks meth, and they team up together to make the purest meth on the streets. Initially, Walter does this so he can make enough money to support his family after his death. However, as the show goes on, Walter slowly descends into wickedness. Walter does some very, very awful things. He becomes coldhearted and cruel. Breaking Bad is truly one of the most fantastic television shows ever made, and I strongly recommend watching it if you haven't already. You'll love Walter in the beginning, and throughout, you'll slowly go from admiration for his strength and toughness, to disdain for the awful lengths he'll go to reach his goal, despite who it affects in the process.