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Handout for “Structural Screwity: A Brief Guide To Reading and Writing Experimental Fiction”

Handout – n. 1. Piece of paper with information given to a person 2. flier, handbill, note, etc. 3. Pile of papers sitting in the back of the room for you to pick up before the session begins. 4. *Honest to Goodness* good information 5. A demonstration in arbor entropy. 6. <insert your definition here>

Some other definitions (but not regarding to 'handout'):

Postmodernism –

1. A literary movement appearing as a term sometime in the late 1960s.
2. Tenants of Postmodernism:
 1. Emphasizes a self-awareness of its own construction/existence; self referential
 2. An overall break from the assumption that truth and knowledge are objective things.
 1. According to Linda Hutcheon:
it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement...Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity....postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees (Hutcheon 1, 2)
3. Brian McHale, in Postmodernist Fiction, argues that postmodernism is more about a change in dominant from epistemology¹ to ontology² (McHale 5). By this shift, McHale argues that

¹*Epistemology*- Epistemology is a philosophy of interpretation. Usually when defining this and ontology, I quote a lot of what Brian McHale has to say on them from Postmodernist Fiction. I'm kind of tired of quoting him, so I'm going to paraphrase instead. The bullets below are drawn from McHale p.9:

- The reader is concerned with identifying how the text defines the world presented within the book.
- We assume that this is the only world in existence, and our understanding of this world is limited by our characters/narrators.
- We are trying to understand how the characters/narrators know what they know about the world, and how much we can trust/believe this interpretation.
- Epistemology differs from the realist movement in that realists tended to assume that their characters/narrators were presenting the “truth” of the world as a fact at all times.
- Epistemologically, we allow for variances of intelligence, interpretation, lies, etc, and are open to a wider array of emotion and interpretation.
- Stream of Consciousness is a literary mode that sprung from the epistemological mindset—something that would have been hard to interpret under a traditional realist method of interpretation.
- The Modernists (Faulkner, Joyce, Hemingway, etc) are known for bringing this method of interpretation into prime existence.

²*Ontology* – The ontological philosophy shatters all of the “truth” in epistemology.

- Ontology is a plural-view philosophy that makes allowances for multiplicity in all of its forms.
- Ontologically, the text in front of you is but one possible arrangement of an infinite array of variations.
 - Jorge Luis Borges captures the true spirit of ontological knowledge in “The Library of Babel,” where all of civilization exists within an infinite library, with everyone searching for a duplicate book of anything (and not finding any duplicates).
- Ontology is the philosophy primarily used when reading postmodern texts, but it is also the dominant method for reading Sci-Fi/Fantasy novels—which are often thought of as the non-literary spinoffs of postmodernism.
- We accept that Truth with a capital T does not exist, that experience is subjective, as well as truth.
- We also accept that the world presented within the text is not automatically our own world, that it may be similar, but there exists a constant possibility for variation.
- Postmodernists are well known for using recognizable proper nouns, people, places, things in completely fictive and bizarre manners. This notion is called transworld identity.
 - Ohio, is perhaps, one of the most altered landscapes in postmodern fiction according to Brian McHale (he devotes an entire sub-chapter to it).

Postmodernism rises from the ashes of Modernism and is largely a reaction towards/against the Modernist movement.

4. Playfulness is a big part of postmodern convention, and can appear as:
 1. Challenging the status quo
 2. Changing formatting/visual appearance of the text
 3. Forcefully slamming two or more worlds together
 4. This playfulness “is not a degeneration into 'hyperreality' but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it” (Hutcheon 34). Furthermore, Hutcheon continues,
 1. many postmodern strategies are openly premised on a challenge to the realist notion of representation that presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between sign and referent or between word and world. Of course, modernist art...challenged this notion as well, but it deliberately did so to the detriment of the referent, that is, by emphasizing the opacity of the medium and the self-sufficiency of the signifying system. What postmodernism does is to denaturalize both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response, while retaining...the historically attested power of both. (34)
3. Some Key Postmodern texts:
 1. Chimera – John Barth
 2. Labyrinths – Jorge Luis Borges
 3. I, etcetera – Susan Sontag
 4. Foucault's Pendulum – Umberto Eco

Some aspects of postmodernist fiction:

Metafiction –

1. A literary tactic in which the work of fiction somehow refers to its own construction, nature as fiction, or the author of the work.
 2. Metafiction can be as simple as Scheherazade telling her husband one of the 1001 tales, or more complex like John Barth's “Lost in the Funhouse,” where the narrative itself becomes self-referential.
 3. The effect of metafiction is to make the reader realize that he is reading a fictive work.
 1. While this may sound obvious, it is subtly different than a non-metafictive work, where the object is to make the fiction as seamless and the author as invisible as possible.
 4. Metafiction denies the transparency of fiction, and forces the reader to reckon with the fact that he is reading.
 5. It creates an awareness of the ontological nature of the story, and the layer of separation between the reader and the story.
 6. Once a work is identified as a metafictive one, all elements of the story fall under suspicion because of our awareness of the story's artifice.
 1. As an artifice, everything must have a reason, so therefore,
 1. We scrutinize the individual elements.

 - Using such knowable items within an ontologically defined text help the reader ground himself in something familiar without actually requiring the text to become truly familiar.
 - If I use “Ohio” as a place in my story, I will establish a contract with my reader who knows of “Ohio,” even though my Ohio may be set near the equator and covered in dense mangrove swamps—the connection is still there even if the factual truth of the place is missing, and that's how the plurality of it all fits into place (McHale 49).
- In an ontology, we're not tied to one interpretation of the world, but rather several. And these layers can and often do become metafictive with intrusions from the author, characters from other works, or direct asides to the reader.

2. Such scrutiny, opens the door to one of ontology's primary purposes—to question the world(s) in view and to interpret what the characters are doing there, how they can do such things, and by what rules, etc they can do things (McHale 10).
7. Metafiction's big drawback is its potential for pretentiousness
 1. It is very easy to insert a metafictional authorial intrusion with the best of intentions and have it come off as snobbish avant garde foppery. And there's a lot of bad metafiction out there because of this.
8. The advantage, of course, is that it can open up your reader's mind to a deeper meaning within the story, and engage the reader in a way that a traditional approach cannot ever hope to achieve.
9. A few notable Metafictions:
 1. The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor – John Barth (nearly all of John Barth's body of work, actually)
 2. “The Story” - Amy Bloom
 3. The Age of Wire and String – Ben Marcus
 4. “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” - Jorge Luis Borges

Historiographic Metafiction

1. A term coined by Linda Hutcheon. It represents not just a world of fiction, however self-consciously presented as a constructed one, but also a world of public experience. The difference between this and the realist logic of reference is that here that public world is rendered specifically as discourse. How do we know the past today? Through its discourses, through its texts—that is, through the traces of its historical events: the archival materials, the documents, the narratives of witnesses...and historians. (36).
2. It asks “how we represent—how we construct—our view of reality and of our selves,” and “is “obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today” (42, 47).
3. This particular movement in metafiction is primarily notable in Contemporary British literature, and has come about largely because many Britons feel that they have lost their History (capital H) when the British Empire fell.
4. These texts often work with large historical events on a very microcosmic, personal scale.
 1. Harold Crick in Waterland teaches students about World War II, inserting his own history on the event, but throughout, we learn that Crick's version of the war is dissimilar from our collective view of it; and this is the aim of historiographic metafiction, to subjectify “truths,” and deny Truth (capital T) in an objective sense.
5. A few notable texts:
 1. Waterland – Graham Swift
 2. Moon Tiger – Penelope Lively
 3. The Remains of the Day – Kazuo Ishiguro.

Footnotes

1. Most commonly, footnotes add a [false] sense of legitimacy to the fiction:
 1. Dates
 2. references to other works (real or imagined)
 3. authorial asides reinforcing the primary text
 4. Authors that use this type of footnote in fiction:
 1. Tim O'Brien
 2. Mark Danielewski
 3. David Foster Wallace
2. Footnotes can also become sub narratives spinning off away from the main body of the text.

1. This type of footnote can be seen in the fiction of:
 1. William H. Gass
 2. Vladimir Nabokov.
3. A few notable texts:
 1. In the Lake of the Woods - Tim O'Brien
 2. House of Leaves – Mark Danielewski
 3. Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife – William H. Gass
 4. Pale Fire – Vladimir Nabokov.

Plurality

1. Plurality in fiction is the understanding that more than one world is in existence.
2. With more than one world, you have more than one version of each character, and therefore, you must constantly question which version of the character you are dealing with at any given moment.
3. Another version of plurality comes into effect when you have an author that writes himself into the text.
 1. Clearly the author-character is not the true author of the book, but rather an avatar or partial construct of the true author.
 2. Under this respect, again the ontological layers between real and fictional worlds are foregrounded, and the reader is forced to reckon with the difference between
 1. the author-god and the author-character, and sometimes the author himself as a person unrelated completely to the fiction in question.
4. Plurality in general usually comes in layers, and ultimately the layers, though they may seem confusing, help to engage the reader more into the story, by forcing the reader to pay more attention to what's going on.
5. Some examples of works that employ plurality include
 1. Coming Soon!!!! - John Barth
 2. Invisible Cities – Italo Calvino
 3. “Borges and I” - Jorge Luis Borges
 4. “The Garden of Forking Paths” - Jorge Luis Borges

World

1. Worlds aren't necessarily massive things like planets.
2. A world in fiction can be your backyard, your bedroom, your head.
3. Simply put, it is the space in which the story takes place.
4. This world can be epistemologically assumed to be the real world (default choice)
5. Or it can be an ontological projected world, something created, under erasure, etc.
6. Some Fictive examples of different worlds in existence include:
 1. “Hymn” - Aimee Bender (surreal reality presented as normal)
 2. The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil – George Saunders (surreal reality presented as normal)
 3. “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned” - Wells Tower (Viking era Europe presented with modern thinking/speech patterns)
 4. The Sot Weed Factor – John Barth (Alternate Early-American history)
 5. “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” - Jorge Luis Borges (a hidden country placed in our reality).

Erasure

1. Erasure is a concept wherein a portion of a text is overtly destroyed before the reader's eyes.
2. This can be achieved through ~~strikeout~~ formatting, or other, more subtle methodologies including

1. Loss of/removal of certain letters
2. The shortening of lines
3. Authorial intrusion stating that everything you read up to this point just got sacked.
3. The effect of erasure, according to McHale is that it exposes “the processes by which readers, in collaboration with texts, construct fictional objects and worlds” (100).
4. Therefore, when encountered by erasure, the reader constructs the fictive world as one that is partly erased.
5. Some Texts:
 1. House of Leaves – Mark Danielewski
 2. Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife – William H. Gass

Transworld Identities

1. A term coined by Umberto Eco, transworld identities are real world people, names, or places that appear within a projected world.
2. By their existence, transworld identities become synonymous, yet separate from their real-world version—a duplicity that allows the projected world to attain a greater sense of stability through its attachment to real world objects (McHale 35).
3. By adding legitimacy, transworld identities become especially useful to the reader in more difficult texts, like Ben Marcus' The Age of Wire and String
 1. They are grounding points of familiarity that help readers in dealing with alien worlds.
 2. In the above example, Ben Marcus uses his own name as well as his father's name, brother's name, and references both grandfather and mother within the text.
 3. In addition, he makes references to several states in the Midwest.
4. Another effect of transworld identities is to use them to help blur the line between fact and fiction
 1. Often you'll see this version of transworld identities appear in conspiracy themed books like Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49.
 2. In these situations, the transworld identities help add tension through the readers' familiarity with the real world version of the transworld identity.
5. Other examples of books including transworld identities include:
 1. Armageddon the Musical--Robert Rankin (Elvis)
 2. Foucault's Pendulum – Umberto Eco (Templars, Freemasons, and other secret societies)
 3. The Public Burning – Robert Coover (Nixon)

Short Chapters, lists, whitespace, and other kinds of oddball formatting

1. I'm lumping these together, because ultimately, their appearance forces the reader to reckon with the physical text as an additional ontological layer to the story.
2. When fiction breaks out of its normal convention of a solid block of text, the reader becomes physically aware of the book's existence and construction.
 1. From McHale, “In other words, the spacing-out of the text, along whatever axis or combination of axes, induces an ontological hesitation or oscillation between the fictional world and the real-world object—the material book” (184).
3. This type of foregrounding is perhaps one of the most common features of postmodern texts.
4. Here are a few examples:
 1. The Last Samurai --Helen DeWitt
 2. “Project for a Trip to China” -- Susan Sontag
 3. House of Leaves – Mark Danielewski
 4. Only Revolutions – Mark Danielewski
 5. Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife – William H. Gass

6. The Age of Wire and String – Ben Marcus

Reading Experimental texts

1. Experimental fiction is a willful deviation upon the part of the author; such deviation requires the author to be able to execute the story with purpose and supporting reason for experimentation.
2. When reading an experimental text, your first and foremost duty is to understand the nature of experimentation and define why it is structurally necessary to the story.
 1. Start reading with the assumption that nothing is arbitrary within the text
 2. Read with an ontological mindset
 3. Identify non-traditional devices, or the absence of traditional devices
3. Interpreting experimental fiction is very much like trying to read a cypher—it's all there in front of you, but you need to jumble it around a bit to tease out its inner meaning.
 1. A good way to go about this, is to question each structural element:
 1. Why are there footnotes in this story?
 2. How do they serve the story?
 3. Who is adding the footnotes?
 1. A character?
 2. The author?
 4. Or Why did the author decide not to use Freytag's triangle to structure the plot elements of this story?
 1. Could it have worked with Freytag's triangle instead? Etc.
4. Essentially, since postmodernist fiction is very much self-aware, you as the reader need to be equally aware of what the author is [or is not] doing.
5. Once the piece's inner workings and goal becomes apparent, there will usually be a moment of epiphany, where all of the individual piece part elements of the book fall into place.
 1. For me, this epiphany is exactly the type of payoff that makes me love postmodernist fiction so much.
 2. It's also the reason why a lot of folks don't like postmodernist fiction
 1. they either don't know how to reach the epiphany
 2. or [tragically] the author doesn't build a “complete” enough piece to allow for epiphany.
6. Unfortunately, due to the high investment cost in postmodernist fiction, I think a lot of people shy away from it unnecessarily. Especially considering that most postmodernist works are more accessible than many of the works from the Modernist era. However, now that you've had several aspects of postmodernism's favorite tactics defined, hopefully the upside of postmodernism's greatness will be within your grasp.

Suggested further reading on Postmodern Theory:

1. “The Literature of Exhaustion”/”The Literature of Replenishment” - John Barth
 1. both essays are very accessible and revolve around the spirit of postmodernism's potential magic, and what it can do for the literary community.
2. Postmodernist Fiction – Brian McHale
 1. An excellent (and probably my favorite) text on the nature of postmodernism. It is at once completely accessible, and thoroughly informative. McHale uses a huge amount of easy to follow examples that help unravel the words of postmodernism's greatest philosophers.
3. The Politics of Postmodernism – Linda Hutcheon
 1. A little less accessible than McHale, but still an excellent treatment of postmodernism, with a healthy injection of its interrelatedness of the [other postmodern] arts, and its effects on politics and feminism.
4. Postmodernism: A Reader – Thomas Docherty, ed.

1. A collection of original publications on postmodernism. This is a hard theory book, and as such, I've never found it to be as illuminating as, say, McHale or Hutcheon, but it does present the original arguments of Postmodernism, and in that vein is very thorough.

Works Cited

Hutcheon, Linda. The Politics of Postmodernism. 1993. New York: Routledge, 1989.
McHale, Brian. Postmodernist Fiction. 1994. New York: Routledge, 1987.