

**Postmodernism in Literature**  
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**Week - 08**  
**Lecture - 25**  
**Postmodern Writings: Features, trends and some departures**

Hello everyone, welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course Postmodernism in Literature. Today's lecture is titled postmodern writings, features, trends and some departures. We had been taking a look at a range of postmodern writings especially from the genre of fiction.

This is also a good time to reflect upon those discussions and also highlight the different ways in which postmodern writings have been manifesting themselves and also to notice particularly the fact that there is no single way in which one can talk about postmodern writings. They deflected across genres and this is evident and different forms of experimentation which the contemporary has been witnessing.

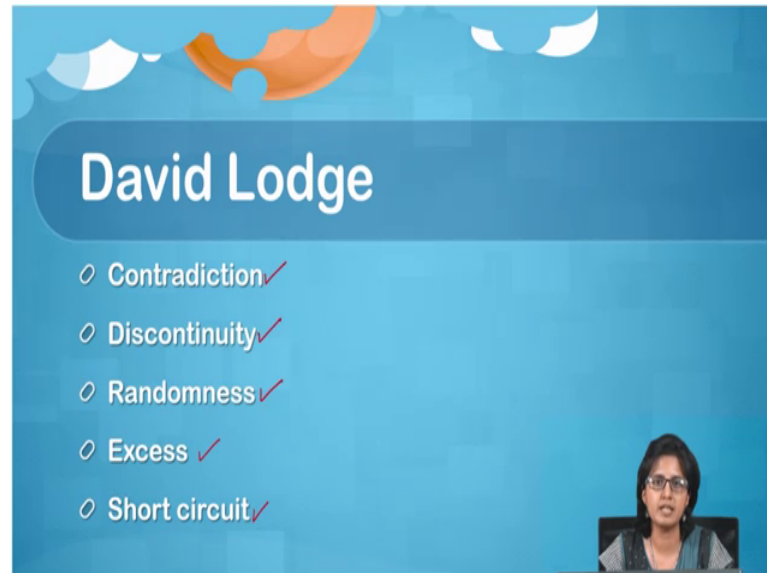
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It is also important to recall at this point that postmodernism has usually generally been defined as in connection with modernism as a departure from modernism to post modernism or in terms of the oppositions which the terms of modernism and post modernism are stand for. So, the term post modernism it would be safe to save and that it

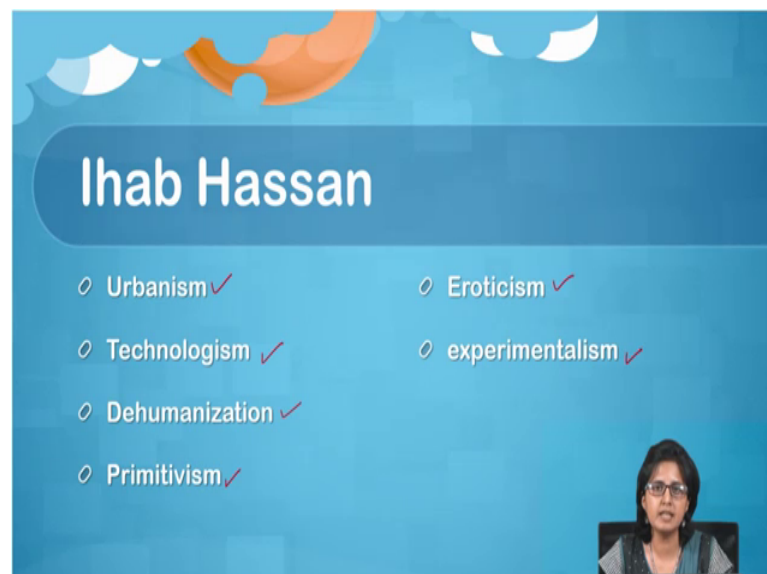
is typically organized and defined in terms of opposition particularly in connection with the aspects related to modernism.

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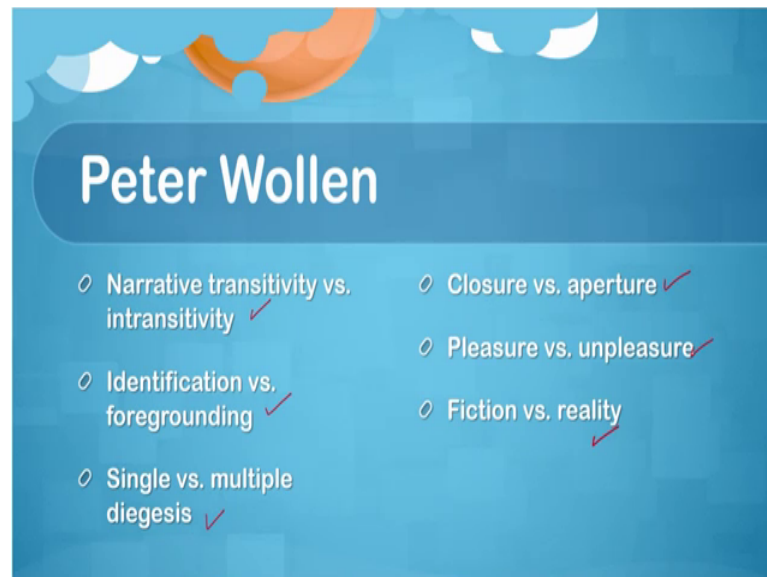
So, it is in that context that we also recall some of the ways in which postmodernism has been defined particularly in contrast in opposition to that modernism. Accordingly David Lodge focuses on these aspects of postmodernism such as a contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess and short circuit this these elements could be seen in vary integrate and different kinds of postmodern writings.

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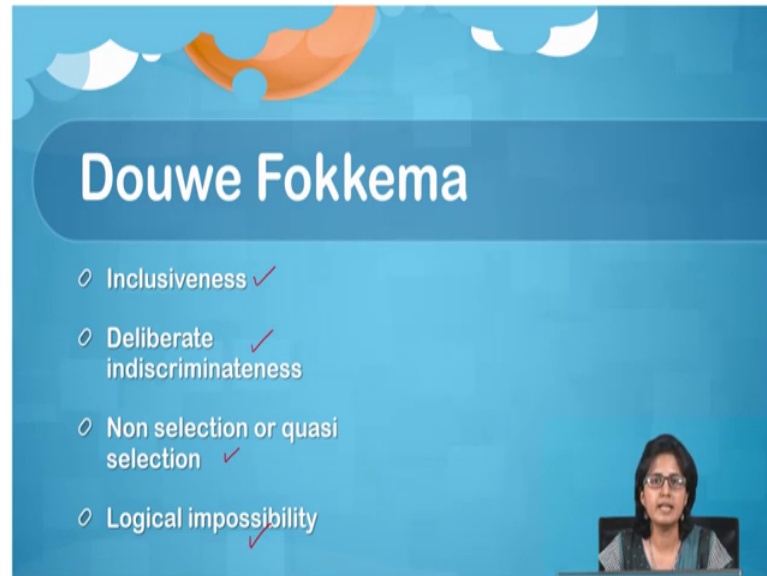
Ihab Hassan talks about a urbanism, technologism, dehumanization, primitivism, eroticism and experimentalism. It is not as of all of these elements can be seen in the same set of works they would be seen in varying degrees and different sets of writings of the contemporary.

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Peter Wollen gives is a very different description of postmodernism by highlighting the dichotomies relationship that exists between modernism and post modernism. He in that sense talks about narrative transitivity and in transitivity, identification verses foregrounding, single versus multiple diegesis, closure versus aperture, pleasure verses unpleasure, and fiction versus reality and some of these aspects we have begun to notice in the discussions of postmodern fiction.

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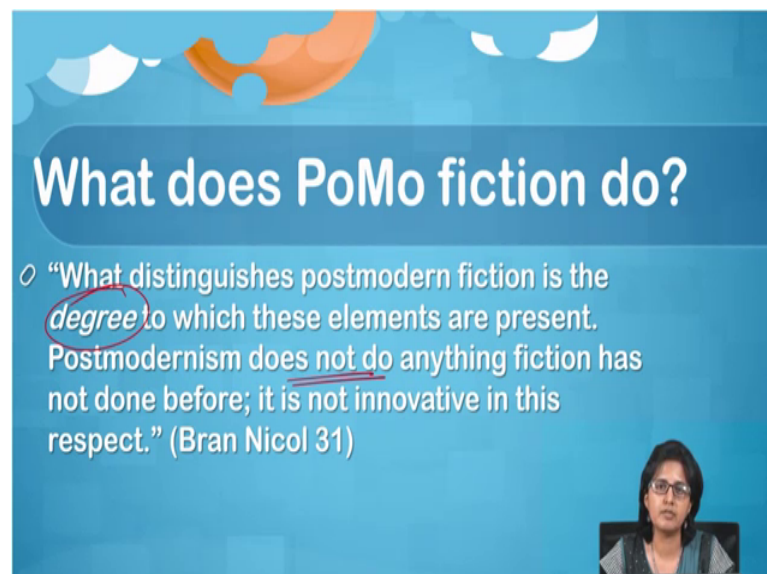


## Douwe Fokkema

- o Inlusiveness ✓
- o Deliberate indiscriminateness ✓
- o Non selection or quasi selection ✓
- o Logical impossibility ✓

Douwe Fokkema talks about certain succinct aspects which could be seen in most of postmodern ah writings. Such as inclusiveness, deliberate indiscriminateness non selection or quasi selection and logical impossibility. So, this also leaves us with this question if a range of these descriptions could be used, of a range of these are terms could be used to talk about to describe postmodern writings. What exactly is postmodern writing?

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## What does PoMo fiction do?

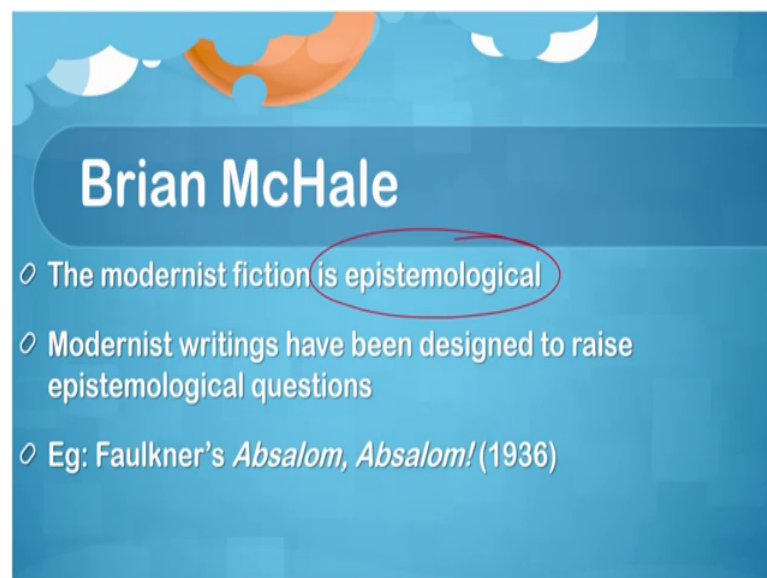
- o “What distinguishes postmodern fiction is the degree to which these elements are present. Postmodernism does not do anything fiction has not done before; it is not innovative in this respect.” (Bran Nicol 31)

How do we begin to for example, talk about what postmodernism or postmodern fiction particularly does? Bran Nicol has a very interesting description. He in his introduction to postmodern fiction he says; what distinguishes postmodern fiction is that degree to which these elements are present.

Postmodernism does not do anything fiction has not done before; it is not innovative in this respect. This is a useful quotation for us to take a look at this point. Whenever we had been talking about different aspects of postmodernism when we had been discussing different kinds of postmodern writings, we have always noticed how certain previous genres, certain pre-exist conventions have been used in different ways in postmodern writings.

So, Bran Nicol is very right when he points out that post modernism does not do anything fiction has not done before and that it is not innovative in this respect. Then what exactly makes postmodern fiction different from the kind of fiction that existed prior to this moment.

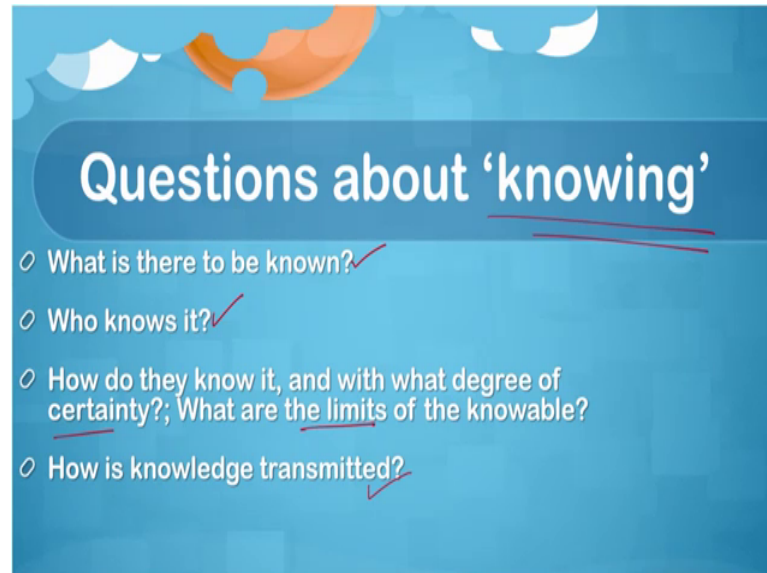
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Brian McHale perhaps has an appropriate response to this a question, to this dilemma; that postmodern writing are was before as. Brian McHale begins to identify that modernist fiction is primarily epistemological which is about knowing and he also argues that modernist writings have been designed to raise epistemological questions. He gives the example of a Faulkner's well known work *Absalom, Absalom* published in 1936. In

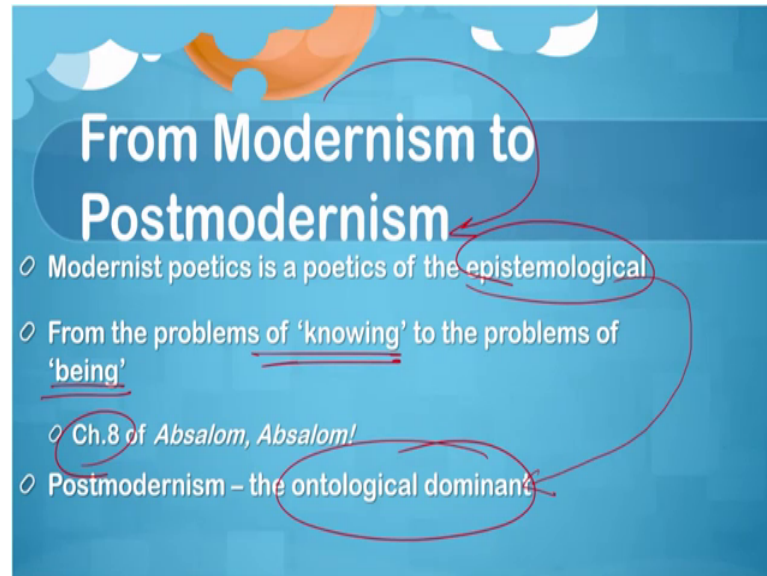
one of our earliest discussions we also had taken a look at Absalom, Absalom highlighting how this pursues the epistemological question in multiple ways.

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When we say that modernist fiction is epistemological we are also highlighting certain questions about knowing, questions such as; what is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? What are the limits of the knowable? And how is knowledge transmitted? It could be a series of similar questions about knowing. In modernist fiction, in modernist writings we find a lot of concern about these epistemological questions, about these issues related to the idea of knowledge and about the process of knowing.

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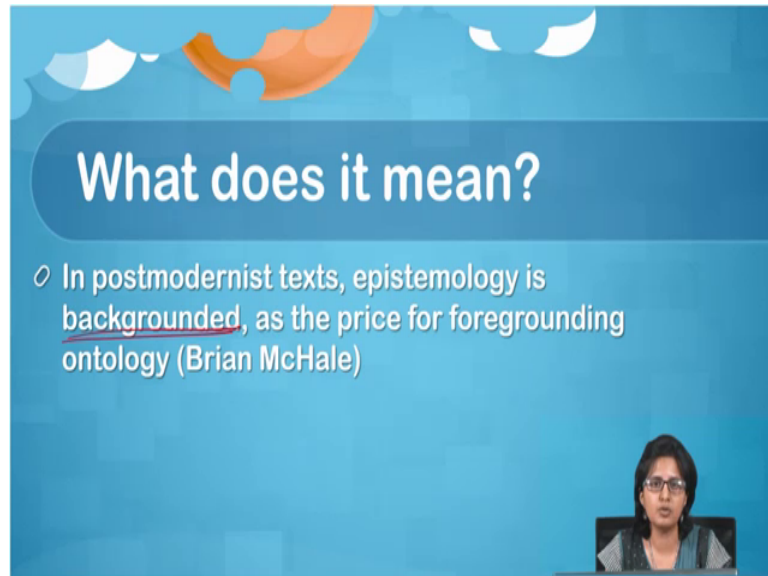


However when we come from modernism to post modernism we find a very radical shift from the epistemological towards the ontological dominant. So, the one of the major things which differentiate postmodern fiction from modernist fiction is this shift from the epistemological towards the ontological dominant. If we could say that the modernist poetics is a poetics of the epistemological, in the same way during the post modernist phase there is a celebration of the ontological dominant. Accordingly there is also a shift from the problems of knowing to the problems of being.

So, what makes postmodern fiction radically different from modernist fiction, is this shift from the epistemological to the ontological this shift from the problems of knowing to the problems of being. If, we again go back to the modernist text *Absalom, Absalom* where the predominant concern is related to the epistemological question. We also find that in chapter 8, there is a certain transition that the narrative makes from the epistemological dominant towards the ontological dominant.

It does engage very briefly with certain post modernist concerns, but the text also goes back to the predominant modernist concerns that it had been engaging with. It is also important to state of this point, that this does not mean that the postmodern fiction does not concern itself with epistemological issues. It is not mean that in postmodern fiction the concerns are only about a being, only about ontology.

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**What does it mean?**

- In postmodernist texts, epistemology is backgrounded, as the price for foregrounding ontology (Brian McHale)

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It all the contrary means that in postmodernist texts, epistemology is backgrounded, as the price for foregrounding ontology. Though both these aspect, both the questions related to knowing and being maybe present in postmodern writings, but the questions related to ontology becomes more dominant. It is foregrounded and epistemology is backgrounded.

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**Writers who made this crossover**

- Samuel Beckett (1929-1989) ✓
  - Irish avant-garde writer associated with the Theatre of the Absurd
- Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) ✓
  - Russian-American writer
- Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922-2008) ✓
  - French writer and film maker
- Robert Coover (b.1932) ✓
  - American novelist and short story writer
- Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012) ✓
  - Mexican novelist and essayist
- Thomas Pynchon (b.1937)
  - American novelist

Like the modernist writer William Faulkner, who makes this crossover in one of the chapters of his novel Absalom, Absalom? We can identify a number of writers who made

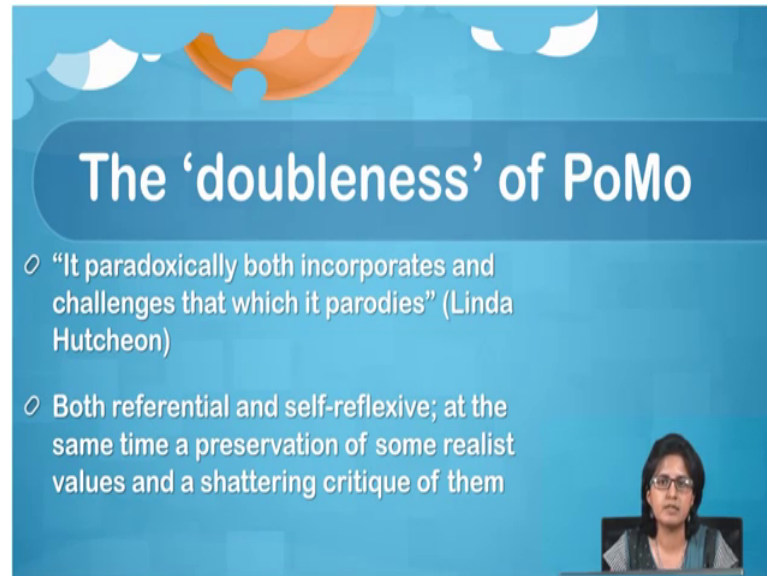


this crossover during their career, who made this shift from the epistemological dominant towards the ontological dominant during their writing career. So, we recall some of those writers who have also become seminal, in the discussions related to postmodern literature. Samuel Beckett who lived from 1929 to 1989, he was an Irish avant-garde writer associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. He is also famously known for being the author of writing for *Godot*.

Alain Robbe-Grillet who lived from 1922 to 2008, he was a film, he was a French writer and a filmmaker and also an important name as far as the discussions related to post modernism is concerned. Carlos Fuentes who lived from 1928 to 2012 was a Mexican novelist and essayist. And Vladimir Nabokov who lived from 1899 to 1977 was a Russian-American writer and best known for his work *Lolita*. Robert Coover who was born in 1932 is an American novelist and a short story writer and Thomas Pynchon born in 1937 is an American novelist, best known for the number of postmodern, novels of him the most important one being *Gravity's Rainbow*, the work that we will be taking a look at in the following session.

So, one of the aspects which distinguishes postmodern fiction from that of modernist of fiction is that there is a crossover from the epistemological dominant towards the ontological dominant is evident in these kinds of writings. The shift from the problems of knowing towards the problems of being, dominates the definitions dominates the concerns which are part of this kind of fiction.

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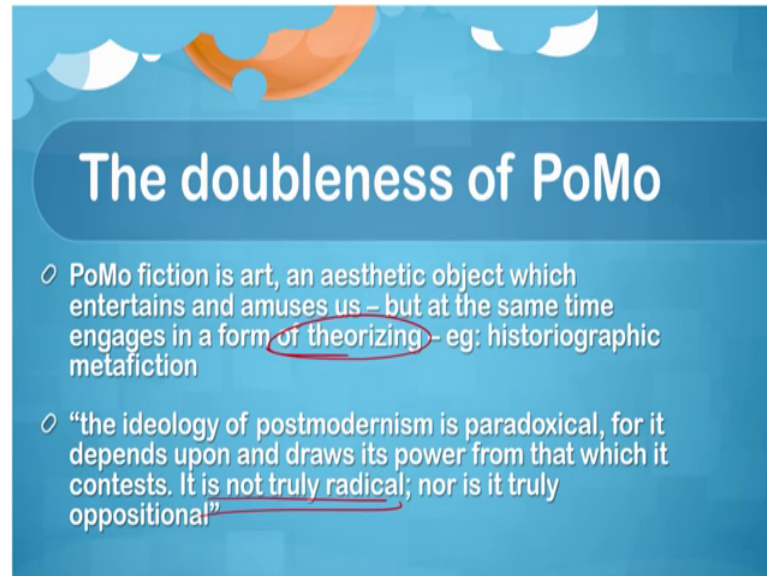
## The 'doubleness' of PoMo

- "It paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (Linda Hutcheon)
- Both referential and self-reflexive; at the same time a preservation of some realist values and a shattering critique of them

The other thing which differentiates postmodern writing from that of modernist writings is the doubleness, which is associated with the post modernism. This is also a term used by Linda Hutcheon to talk about the paradoxical doubleness, associated with postmodern writings. And in Linda Hutcheon's own words post modernism paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies.

We have already noticed this in some of the works that we had discussed. It also means that postmodern writings are both referential and self-reflexive. What they do is at the same time there is a preservation of some realist values and a shattering critique of them. This was something that we noticed in the discussions of a certain work that we have undertaken and as part of this course.

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## The doubleness of PoMo

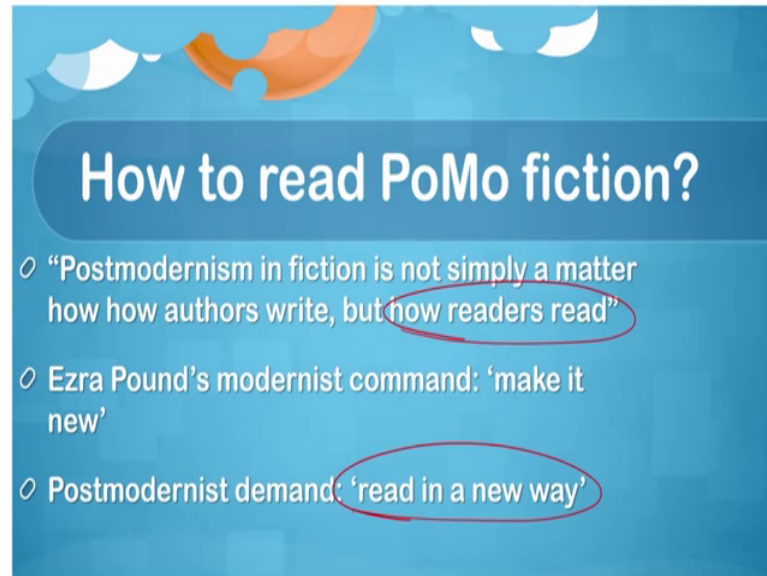
- PoMo fiction is art, an aesthetic object which entertains and amuses us - but at the same time engages in a form of theorizing - eg: historiographic metafiction
- “the ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical, for it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical; nor is it truly oppositional!”

The doubleness of post modernism becomes further interesting when we talk about certain characteristics which are associated with it. Postmodern fiction is definitely seen as a form of an art, as an aesthetic object which entertains as well as amuses us, but at the same time this doubleness becomes more relevant, more telling and more foregrounded when it also engages in the form of theorizing.

And this becomes evident in the examples of historiographic meta-fiction that we have taken a look at we have seen how the novel narrates the story and also engages in a kind of theorization. Again to code Linda Hutcheon, the ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical. For it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical nor is it truly oppositional. So, here we are again brought to the point that we began highlighting in the beginning.

It is not as if postmodernism is doing something radically different from that of the previous era from that of a modernism. But what makes it different is the shift from the problems of knowing towards the problems of being and also the doubleness of it, through which it critiques and parodies the same thing which it uses to its own representation.

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So, given such a context how do we read postmodern fiction. We have certainly attempted reading some of postmodern novels and short stories, but it also makes it important to know how a general kind of a reading process could be adopted in the reading of a postmodern fiction. It is important to understand that post modernism in fiction is not simply a matter of how authors write, but how readers read.

This brings us back to the focus that we had right from the beginning on the responsibility of the reader to make a sense of the text to make meaning out of the text which has been handed over. And this is also in stark contrast with Ezra Pound’s modernist command which said make it new. And the post modernist demand in that sense happens to be read in a new way. The focus from the author to the reader also begins to define the ways of reading postmodern fiction.

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## PoMo fiction: Bran Nicol

“Postmodern fiction continually challenges the reader. A postmodern text is one which – at some level at least – is aware of its own status as something we read, an aesthetic object. It doesn’t pretend its world is the real world or its narrative is natural, and ensures that we cannot do the same, inviting us, indeed at times requiring us to reconsider our relationship with the world of fiction and the story it tells. Self-conscious writing, in other words, produces self-conscious reading”

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Susan Sontag:  
“Against Interpretation” (2001)

- o PoMo is not a dropping of standards but ‘a new way of looking at the world and at things in the world’
- o Art is a challenge



From this rather self explanatory quote we moved to another essay written by Susan Sontag in 2001, title Against Interpretation. In this essay Susan Sontag argues that postmodernism is not a dropping of standards, but a new way of looking at the world and

at things in the world. She begins to identify postmodern art as a challenge that needs to be dealt with. She begins to argue that postmodernism is not about moving away from all kinds of the artistic and standardized elements, it is also about producing a challenging art and also about reading and interpreting in a more effective way.

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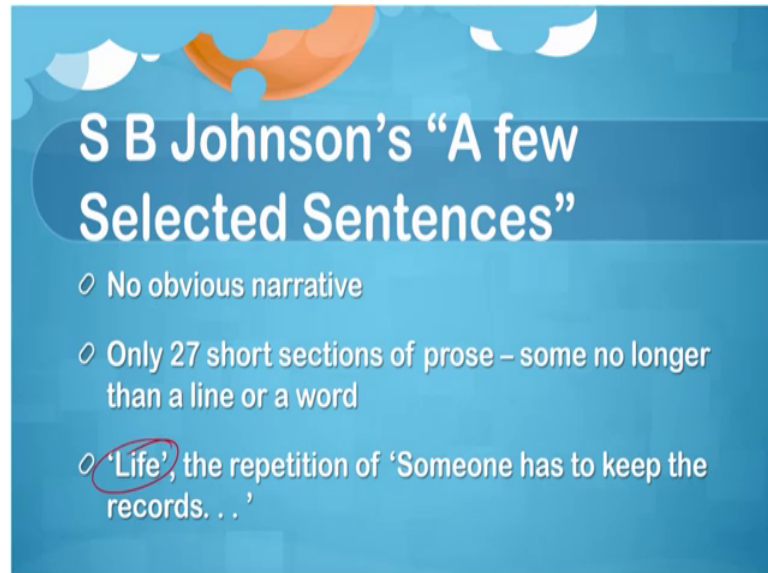


Susan Sontag gives this example of this art and canvas, title Yellow and Orange by Mark Rothko. Here also read to you a commentary on Susan Sontag reading of Yellow and Orange. Susan Sontag gives these examples from visual art to clarify her argument about what art does than what art says. I read to you this commentary. Yellow and Orange by Mark Rothko for example, a canvas upon which are simply two rectangular panels; one positioned above the other. The top one hazy yellow, the one below smudged orange cannot be interpreted in the manner of other modernist forms of visual art such as work by Picasso.

However obscure and challenging, Picasso can be explained by contrast it is difficult to say what wrote cause painting is about. Rather it just is it does not refer to anything except the colours yellow and orange. So, if we wish to claim that yellow and orange is about anything, we can only make the obvious claim that it is about yellow and orange. So, here Susan Sontag is drawing an attention to not just the impossibility of interpreting certain kinds of art forms, but also about the newer kinds of possibilities that are beyond interpretation and just as her work is title Against Interpretation. She is also urging to

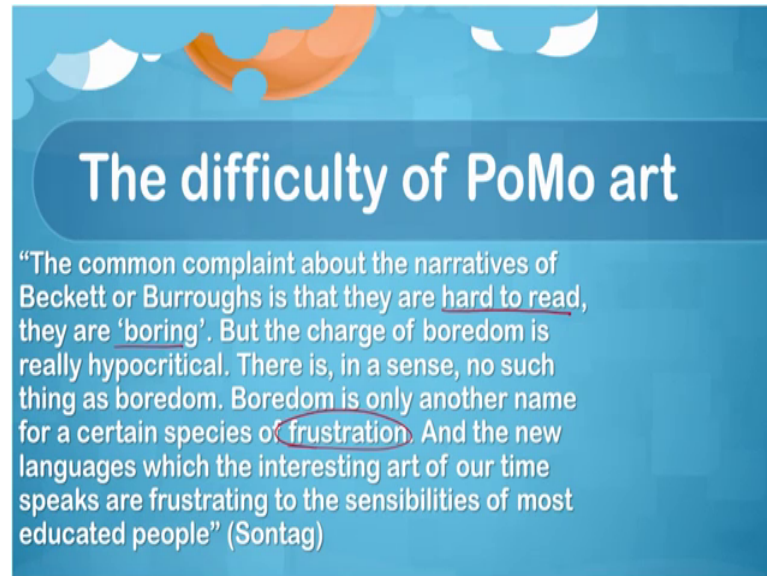
reader, urging the critic to move away from the epistemological possibilities from the problems and possibilities of knowing towards the problems and possibilities of being.

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The other example which could be a site and in this regard is S B Johnson's 1973 short story titled A few Selected Sentences. There is no obvious narrative to this short story and just as the title implies it only comprises of 27 short sections of prose and some of them are no longer than a line or a word. A one of such sentences life, the other one is a range of repetitions of someone has to keep the records. So, there is no obvious linear narrative and there is no meaning that emerges. So, this totally defies all conventions of reading and criticism and it is also calling for a new kind of interpretation to be used to make sense of these kinds of postmodern renditions.

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And here Susan Sontag also begins to theorise on the difficulty of postmodern art and she has a very interesting interpretation to this kind of difficulty which postmodern art are presence. I read to you from Susan Sontag. The common complaint about the narratives of Beckett or Burroughs is that they are hard to read, they are boring. But the charge of boredom is really hypocritical.

There is in the sense no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration and the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating to the sensibilities of most educated people. I am sure many of us would be able to relate with this that Susan Sontag was talking about. Postmodern art if not anything is frustrating to begin with. The difficulty that it presents before us is a frustrating because it does not fit in with the conventions of the usual kinds of reading practices. It does not fit in well with the critical possibilities in which we have been trained and this difficulty she also points out.



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**“a postmodern classic before there was a modernism to be post about”**

Metafiction, questioning the relationship between text and the self, ambiguity between reality and representation

The narrator is born only in Vol.III – ridden with digressions

A blank page inviting the reader to fill in

It is accentuated by the differences in form. It is the experimentation, is the continual experimentation with a form that makes postmodern art all the more difficult.

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**A historical novel that exists outside of history**

Writes in a single flow of words without paragraph indentations

Impossible to distinguish between the factual and the fictional

The author's practice of illustrating his narratives with poorly reproduced photographs

Whether we are taking a look at an earlier 19th century novel Tristram Shandy or a fairly recent one Austerlitz at 2001 novel by W. G. Sebald, we find different kinds of experimentations being undertaken with respect to form. It is not only challenging, but also defies all conventions of literary criticism and the process of reading. Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne is a 19th century text, which predates the event of

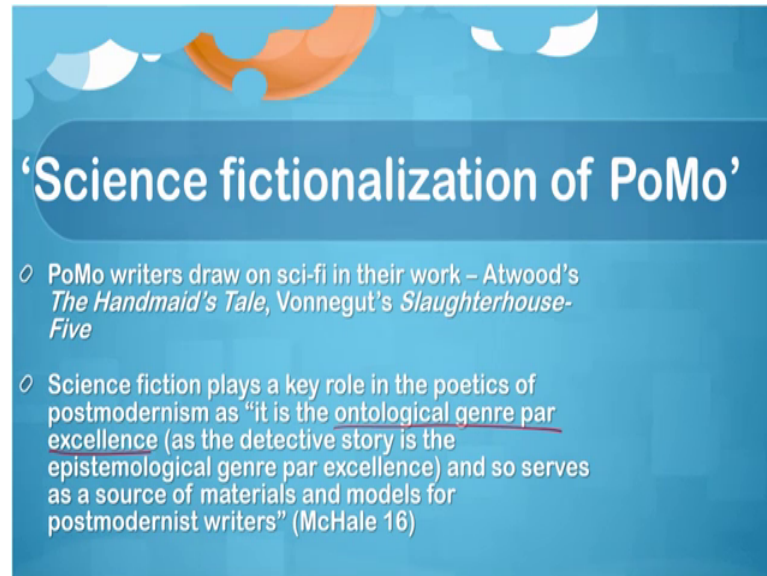
postmodernism, as someone has very interestingly put it. It is a postmodern classic before there was a modernism to be post about. Though the terms currently associated with postmodernism were not available in the nineteenth century discourse. We do realize that aspects of meta-fiction the idea of questioning the relationship between text and the self, the ambiguity between reality and representation where among the many postmodern elements that, we are part of this narrative Tristram Shandy.

And contrary to the realist tradition which was dominant in the 18th and 19th centuries, we find that interest from Shandy the narrator who is Tristram Shandy. The narrator and protagonist Tristram Shandy is only born in volume 3 of this very long laborious read and this is ridden with a lot of digression which also becomes extremely central in understanding the crux of the work. And as we have noted in one of the earlier sections, this is also an interesting work which left a blank page inviting the reader to fill in.

And if we look at one of the recent novels by W. G. Sebald, Austerlitz published in 2001. This novel is about the trauma of the holocaust event and this is also seen as a historical novel that access outside of history. And what makes aust Austerlitz very interesting in terms of it is its structure, in terms of its form? It is that it is written in a single flow of words without any paragraph indentations and it also becomes impossible to distinguish between the factual and the fictional. What further complicates this narration is the authors practice of illustrating his narrative with a poorly reproduced photographs.

So, we begin to see that from inserting a blank page in the middle of a novel to not inserting paragraphs as well as inserting photographs becomes different forms of experimentation in postmodern writing. And it is this varied kinds of experimentation with form that makes it all the more difficult for us to engage with postmodern a kind of art.

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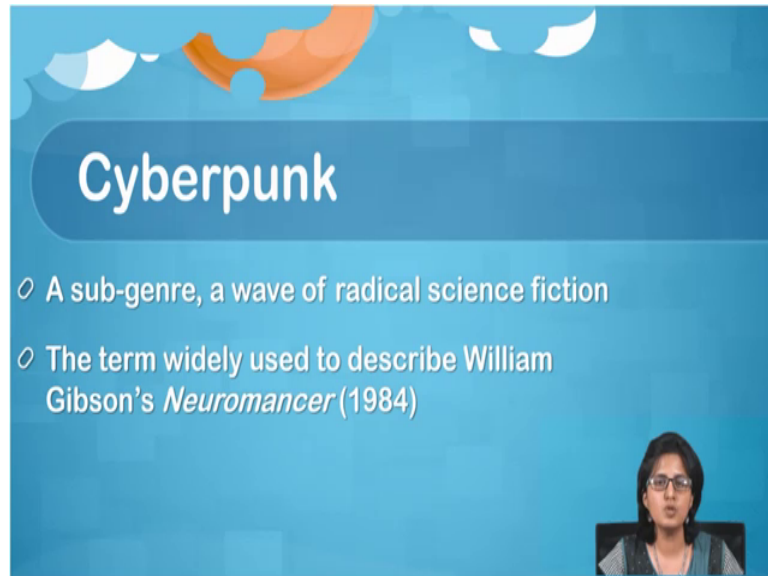
## 'Science fictionalization of PoMo'

- PoMo writers draw on sci-fi in their work – Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*
- Science fiction plays a key role in the poetics of postmodernism as "it is the ontological genre par excellence (as the detective story is the epistemological genre par excellence) and so serves as a source of materials and models for postmodernist writers" (McHale 16)

Talking about the varied possibilities that postmodern art offers, it would not be appropriate, also to draw attention to the science fictionalization of post modernism. This is also a term used by Brian McHale and we have noticed that postmodern writers draw extensively from science fiction and their works.

We also saw two examples recently Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five* and Brian McHale points out that science fiction plays a key role in the poetics of post modernism as, it is the ontological genre par excellence, as a detective story is the epistemological genre par excellence, as a source of materials and models for post modernist writers. This also explains the extensive use of science fiction in most of the postmodern writings. We also notice in one of the previous sessions that, in a similar way historiographic metafiction was also used extensively as one of the dominant ways in which postmodern fiction gets written.

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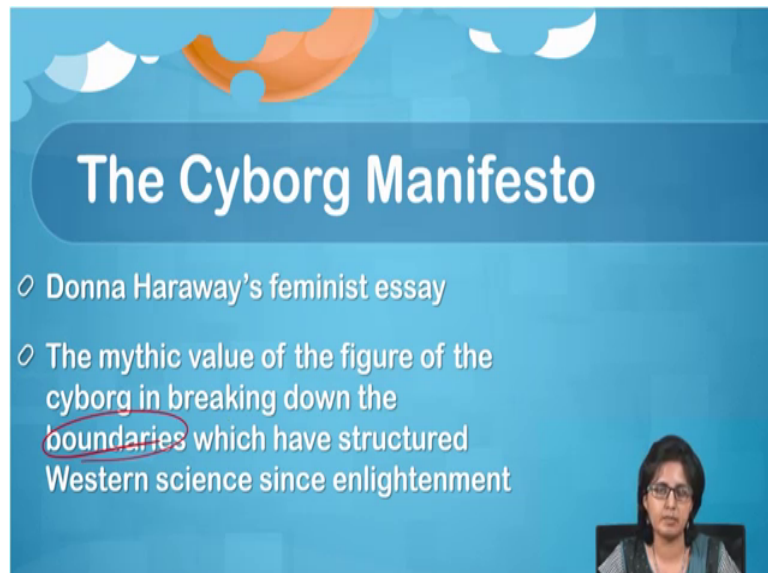
**Cyberpunk**

- A sub-genre, a wave of radical science fiction
- The term widely used to describe William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984)

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Cyberpunk is also another sub-genre and a wave of radical science fiction and this term has been widely used to describe William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the novel published in 1984 and after that there was a part of similar kinds of works which could be labelled as cyberpunk. This has also been seen as very tellingly postmodern.

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**The Cyborg Manifesto**

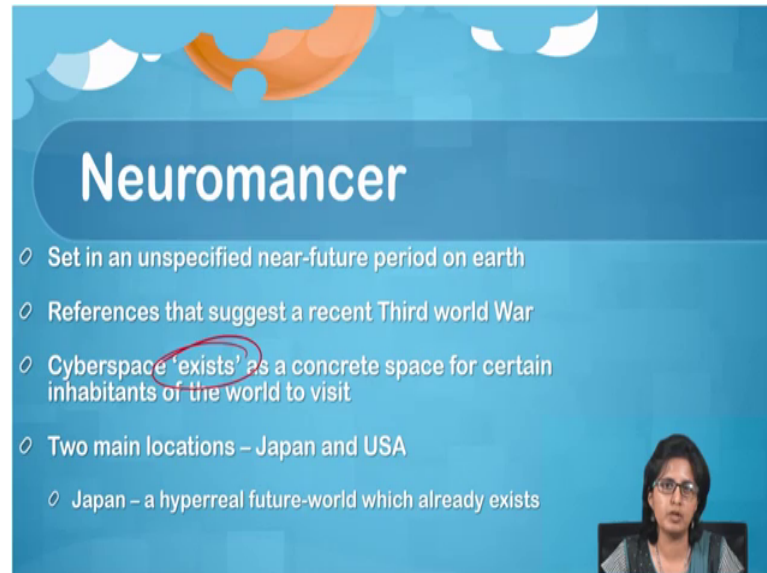
- Donna Haraway's feminist essay
- The mythic value of the figure of the cyborg in breaking down the boundaries which have structured Western science since enlightenment

A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows a woman with glasses speaking.

And we may also recall the discussions that we had on Donna Haraway's feminist essay. The *Cyborg Manifesto* published in the 1980s which talks about the mythic value of the

figure of the Cyborg in breaking down the boundaries which have structured western science since enlightenment, such as gender and the idea of the male and the female.

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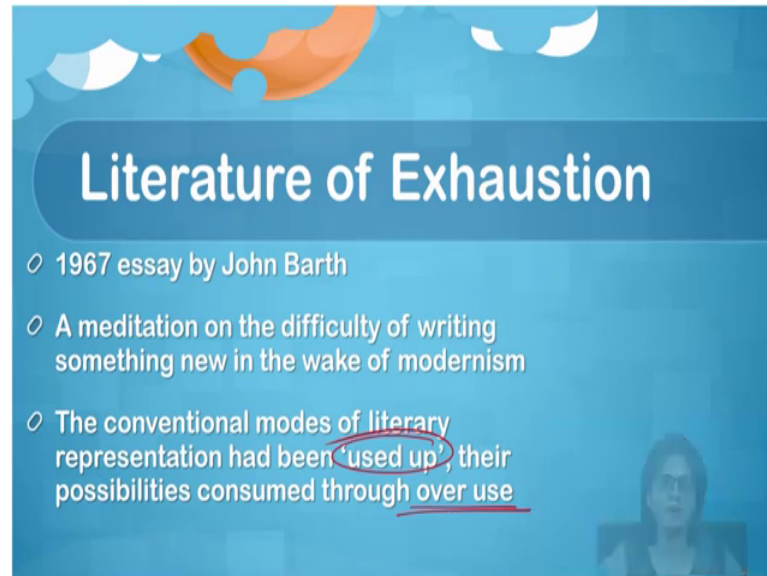
**Neuromancer**

- Set in an unspecified near-future period on earth
- References that suggest a recent Third world War
- Cyberspace 'exists' as a concrete space for certain inhabitants of the world to visit
- Two main locations – Japan and USA
  - Japan – a hyperreal future-world which already exists

Before we wrap up today's discussion let me give you a very brief overview of the novel Neuromancer published in 1984. It will also give us a sense of the wide range of experimentations which are prevalent in the field of postmodern of fiction. The novel Neuromancer is set in an unspecified near future period on earth. There are also references in the novel that suggests a recent Third world War. And in the novel we also notice that the cyberspace is not a virtual space, but on the contrary it exists as a real space, as a concrete space for certain inhabitants of the world to visit.

So, it is a radical reinventioning of the entire idea of reality and the cyberspace. And Gibson also notices that Japan is a very apt location because Japan according to Gibson is a hyper real future world which already exists. So, these are the different kinds of possibilities that postmodern fiction offers to us. From Tristram Shandy till the moment of the sci-work, the explorations of the cyberpunk, we realize that postmodern fiction is able to inhabit a wide range of possibilities, allowing it us to experiment with a range of forms and also opening up newer forms of critical interpretive of frameworks.

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## Literature of Exhaustion

- 1967 essay by John Barth
- A meditation on the difficulty of writing something new in the wake of modernism
- The conventional modes of literary representation had been 'used up', their possibilities consumed through over use

Given these multiple possibilities and prospects associated with postmodern writing. The 1967 essay by John Barth titled Literature of Exhaustion will be a good place to visit at this point. This essay is a mediation on the difficulty of writing something new in the wake of modernism.

This essay has also been considered as a manifesto of post modernism. It also argues that the conventional modes of literary representation had been used up and their possibility is consumed through over use and he also identifies realism as one such technique, which has been overused, which has been used up and leaving us with a literature of exhaustion leaving us with the difficulty of writing something new especially in the wake of modernism.

I do contend that this essay theorizes many of the things that we have been trying to say. It also opens up new possibilities to talk about postmodern literature in general. So, with this we wind up today's session. I also encourage you to take a look at this essay by John Barth titled Literature of Exhaustion, which will give you a sense of why and how such experimentation was imminent in the postmodern moment.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.