Chapter II: The Modernism / Postmodernism Debate

Postmodernism is the new cultural dominant of the West that seeks to define the parameters of contemporary metropolitan culture anywhere in the world today. We occupy a temporal space where the world’s great cities converge in our minds to form a considerably coherent map. This mental map dotted with cities from different geographical spaces, defines the concept of a globe for most of those living in the city. The great European cities like Paris, London, New York, Moscow, Berlin or Vienna have found their replications in the East. By the end of the twentieth century, a number of Asian cities begin to appear on the map as significant places, comparable with their European counterparts, in terms of affluence. Without showing those minimal signs of affluence, cities like Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Seoul, New Delhi or Mumbai would not probably appear on the global map of capitalist enterprise. The city-hopping global citizens are believed to share what we increasingly call a global culture. Capitalism has completed its globe-spanning exercise, and at the same time, it has spawned its cultural eggs all across this globe. As a result, Western forms of consumption practices interacting with local / indigenous cultures have produced hybrid forms of cultural consumption, which is understood generally as postmodernism. Therefore, to understand these characteristics of metropolitan culture, we need to explore the theory of the postmodern. And to do that, we need to locate it initially, in a time-space paradigm.

The major hypotheses of postmodernism, according to Conner, were in their early stage of development from 1970’s to the early 80’s. They were developing on different fronts: “Daniel Bell and Jean Baudrillard were offering new accounts of consumer society, Jean Francois Lyotard was formulating his views about the waning
of meta narratives, Charles Jenks was issuing his powerful manifestoes on behalf of architectural postmodernism and Ihab Hassan was characterizing a new sensibility in postwar writing” (Conner 2). Hence, in its initial phase of development, postmodernism carried different strains of thought: some carried issues of epistemology and philosophy (Lyotard), some others, ideas of style of urban architecture and planning (Charles Jenks and Robert Venturi), while a few others talked about the emergence of consumer aesthetics in culture (Baudrillard and Jameson). If some believed that Western societies had undergone a fundamental shift from the modernity associated with the industrial society of 19th and 20th centuries, others argued that “they discerned a shift in the arts and culture of these societies from a distinctively modernist to a distinctively – or indistinctly – postmodernist phase” (2). Therefore, it was difficult to assimilate these different accounts of a supposedly single experience of postmodernism and present it in the form of a theory. Fredric Jameson made the first significant attempt to theorize this experience in his landmark essay “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1991). This chapter will examine the contributions of thinkers like Lyotard, Jameson and Baudrillard in order to trace the contours of the postmodern debate.

It is generally accepted that postmodernism began as a theory in architecture that tried to explain the forms created by architects like Robert Venturi, but later meandered its way through sculpture, films, literature and other liberal arts to take refuge in the realm of Culture. The claims of the postmodernists are many but the most significant of them all is not so much a claim to new knowledge but the rejection of what they prefer to call universalizing and foundationalist discourses of the 18th and 19th centuries. Jean Francois Lyotard refers to them as “Grand Narratives,” his signature term in the book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*
(1979) to argue that in contemporary post-industrial societies knowledge is legitimated in completely different terms. And therefore, “the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or narrative of emancipation” (Lyotard 37). He attributes the decline of the grand narratives to other important developments in the history of Western nations like “the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War” (37) and “the redeployment of liberal capitalism after its retreat under the protection of Keynesianism during the period 1930-60, a renewal that has eliminated the communist alternative and valorized the individual enjoyment of goods and services” (38).

Lyotard’s emphasis on credibility of knowledge statements and his plea that the overarching and universalizing knowledge claims of enlightenment thinkers should be looked at with scepticism “seem to sum up the ethos of postmodernism” (Sim 3). This attitude of scepticism is nothing new to western philosophy. In fact, it has a long tradition that dates back to Classical Greek philosophy. Hence, the best way to describe postmodernism “would be as a form of scepticism – scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms, etc” (3). Postmodernism actively proposes scepticism as the best possible approach one can adopt to question all claims of authority. Scepticism was also an integral aspect of French post-structuralism which started with questioning the totalizing aspects of structuralism. Therefore, from the point of view of philosophy, one can say that postmodernism encourages an attitude of disdain towards discourses of certitudes. But scepticism has been traditionally viewed as a “negative form of philosophy, which sets out to undermine other philosophical theories claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth or of criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth” (3). Postmodernism
becomes an anti-foundationalist discourse that uses scepticism to question the foundation of other theories, especially those of the enlightenment.

Sim suggests that “the technical term to describe such a style of philosophy is ‘antifoundational’. Antifoundationalists dispute the validity of the foundations of discourse” (3). The questions however are: what does one do after demolishing foundations? And on what grounds does one establish a new theory? Can one theorize without epistemological foundations? It is rather difficult to get answers to such questions from the postmodernists. Nonetheless, one can presuppose that the postmodernists borrow antifoundationalist attitudes from earlier philosophers, “perhaps most notably the iconoclastic nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose call for a ‘revaluation of all values’ constitutes something of a battle-cry for the movement” (3). Such an argument that set out with a clear intention of delegitimating earlier forms of knowledge, signaled serious consequences for almost all disciplines in the humanities. It is therefore crucial to locate the origin, nature and development of this discourse to understand the dynamics it uses to negotiate its way through academic debates of cultural theory.

The prefix ‘post-’ in postmodernism suggests that the term refers to an age or period past modernism. In other words, postmodernism is predicated on the assumption that modernism has now ended. “Postmodernism is normally conceived of as a condition beset by a sense of ending” (Waugh 3). Based on this assumption it announces the inauguration of a new era of ‘after modernism’. Although there are different arguments about the origin and history of the term itself, it is indeed surprising to note that the term “‘first surfaced’ in 1934 in the work of a Spanish writer, Frederico de Onis, who used it specifically to describe a reaction to the artistic
movement of the early twentieth century known as modernism” (Thompson 6). However, if the term is taken as referring to an ‘age’ then it begins to draw completely different meanings. Thompson proposes that “Arnold Toynbee, in the eighth volume of his monumental *A Study of History* (began in 1934), used the coinage ‘post-modern age’ - but this ‘age’ had entirely political and social overtones and was supposed to have commenced in 1870” (6). Therefore, one can propose that postmodernism has several reference points in and implications for art and aesthetics, society, politics, history and also philosophy.

Other than the occasional use of the term in literary criticism in the early twentieth century when modernism had already begun to ossify in the form of high modernism, there was no great importance attached to it till the latter half of the century when in 1970 the American journal *Boundary 2* “incorporated the word in its subtitle: *Boundary2: A journal of Post-modern Literature and Culture*” (Thompson 6). Even here, the editors (Robert Kroetsch and William V. Spanos) were concerned with the literature of a period which they presumed had succeeded the modernist age. Writing about its founding, William Spanos the co editor, clarifies that he and Kroetsch always enjoyed an antagonistic relationship of high seriousness and parody which took the form of “what Heidegger calls an *Aueinandersetzung* – a polemos, in which the antagonistic terms always already belong to each other in an intimacy akin to love” (Spanos 192). Therefore, they decided upon this title hoping that it would reflect “this kind of antagonistic dialogue,” (192) though they had originally thought of naming the journal *Transition 2*.

The two editors had hoped then that the journal would reflect the dominant mood of the times in which they lived, and they believed that their “occasion was an
in-between time: between modernism and an undefined time we identified as ‘postmodern’” (193). They also felt that “the space within the theoretical and creative boundary established by Modernism and Modernist criticism had been utterly colonized” (193). Hence they attempted to establish a new boundary beyond Modernism. However, the term postmodernism entered public discourse in a significant way only in 1977 “with the publication of the text by Charles Jenks, *Language of Post-modern Architecture*” (Thompson 7) and this time it was with reference to architecture that the term was extensively used. But Spanos argues that they had read the word as “a revolutionary movement committed to the exposure of the totalitarian will to power informing the philosophical, aesthetic, and socio-political idealization of closure” (Spanos 193). And therefore he expresses regrets about the way in which the term began to be interpreted by later theorists. Spanos argues that the complete oversight of this meaning led to a blurring of the difference between “what Kroetch and I took postmodernism to be and what it has become by way of later appropriation of the uses to which architects put the word” (193).

Nonetheless, postmodernism’s concern was aesthetic style and it began as a reaction to the earlier form of modernism, which the postmodernists thought suffered from elitism. “Modernism suffers from elitism. Postmodernism is trying to get over that elitism” (Anderson 22). However, to understand the transition from modernism to postmodernism, we need to understand the concept of modernism and the changes that possibly affected it. “Cultural modernism had been born around the transition point between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, influenced too by the developments in the sciences which destroyed commonsense conceptions of the way the physical world functioned” (Thompson 7). While the term modernism referred to the modes of aesthetic representation of the period, modernity on the other hand,
specifically referred to the way in which the physical / material world was conceived, given the new developments in science and technology. Therefore, the distinction between the terms needs to be maintained even though they are interrelated in many ways. It means that the two are not necessarily interchangeable though they are interrelated.

If modernism as a concept of aesthetics is implicated in the cultural sphere, modernity finds its implication in the social. Since postmodernism implies the end of modernism, it is important to analyze both cultural modernism and societal modernity in order to examine the validity of the postmodernists’ claim. Willie Thompson asks: “If this broad tradition could from around 1970 be regarded as exhausted and dying, how should its successor (which would, of course, not be a simple reversion to previous styles but incorporate elements of modernism) be classified?” (7). He follows it with an answer by suggesting that “In the absence of anything better, no doubt ‘postmodern’ would do well enough” (7). However, any serious enquiry into the origin of the term cannot admit such simplistic answers. On the contrary, it warrants a thorough investigation into debates which claim the end of modernity, the death of art, the end of history and also the death of the social. Postmodernists like Jean Baudrillard (Simulacra and Simulations, America) Charles Jenks (The Language of Postmodern Architecture), Robert Venturi (Learning from Las Vegas) and Francis Fukuyama (The End of History and the Last Man) who were largely influenced by the post-structuralist method made significant theoretical contributions to postmodern debate. Postmodernism raises a number of questions that are epistemological, social, political, philosophical and historical. Therefore, it is important to understand modernism and its contradictions to ascertain whether there is, in fact, a transition into postmodernity / postmodernism.
If one first considers modernity and modernism in detail before making any remarks on the advent of postmodernism, one can arrive at some definite conclusions about the end of modernity. The crucial question however is whether modernity has indeed ended and given birth to postmodernity or whether its residual forms have been posted into the latter. In present times where one would receive plenty of answers in the affirmative to the question ‘has modernism indeed ended?’, Eysteisson and Liska in the introduction to their book titled *Modernism* (2007) affirm that “Modernism constitutes one of the most prominent fields of literary studies today,” even as they agree that it is “however, a field that stands in a very ambiguous relationship to the present literary and cultural situation” (1). While admitting that there can be any number of critics on both sides of the Atlantic who are much eager to bury the concept, they argue that there are several indications that “modernism is alive and kicking” (1). It might not have become a “dominant master discourse” (1) even in its hey days and it might certainly not become one now, but “modernism continues to reveal its oppositional and subversive powers through the various shapes of its newer figurations” (1). They, in fact, insist on the “idea of a ‘dominance’ of modernism” (1) mainly because “the concept of modernism is considered a vital link to salient aesthetic, ideological and historical issues which have still not been closed” (1).

This argument is along the lines of Habermas who argues that modernity is, as yet, an unfinished project, in his influential essay “Modernity – An Incomplete Project” (1981). Habermas suggests that the term ‘modern’ has been used time and again at different points in history where people of a particular epoch identified themselves as different from the people of an earlier epoch whom they referred to as ancients. According to him, they do this only to suggest that they are the ‘new’ as compared to the ‘old’: “With varying content, the term ‘modern’ again and again
expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new” (“Modernity - An Incomplete Project” 3). Aesthetic modernity, for him, “is characterized by attitudes which find a common focus in changed consciousness of time” (5). This changed consciousness of time produces in the thinkers of a particular epoch a desire to establish a new ethos which would bring to the forefront all those elements that lay hidden or repressed in the previous epoch. He argues that the canons that define aesthetic consciousness have always been ambiguous, evasive and are also framed by a small circle of experts of that age. Therefore Habermas contends that “This time consciousness expresses itself through metaphors of the vanguard and the avant-garde” (5).

In their attempt to continuously explore new territory and find some direction in a heretofore unexplored landscape, the avant-garde had to take great risks. However, as Habermas rightly points out, “these forward gropings, this anticipation of an undefined future and the cult of the new mean, in fact, the exaltation of the present”(5). He suggests that it was a “new time consciousness” (5) which tried to do more than just express the pace of change and movement in history. This time consciousness placed a new value on “the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism,” (5) which clearly “discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and a stable present” (5). Therefore we can conclude that modernism was beset with internal contradictions right from its inception, especially its belief in the timelessness of art and its conflated notion of an aesthetic of presence that continuously denied its past. The dominant temper of modernity always exhibited itself as an untiring effort to negate the past in order to effectively signify itself as ‘not the past’. This was the subversive force of the new aesthetic consciousness which,
according to Habermas, worked with “the anarchistic intention of blowing up the continuum of history” (5).

The rebellious attitude of the modernists who saw the past as normative and limiting led them into a mode of transcending the limits which was understood by conservatives as transgression. The avant-garde artists regarded the breaking of norms as the very purpose of modernist art. Habermas points out that “Modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative. This revolt is one way to neutralize the standards of both morality and utility” (5). If tradition set the norms of morality and utility of art, modernism constantly defied those norms in the name of innovation and creativity. The avant-garde’s attempt to develop an art based on an experimentation with the new, invited reactions from neo conservatives who saw in the new art a moral decadence. The bitterest reaction came from the American sociologist Daniel Bell, who saw in the developments of modernity the symptoms of cultural degeneration which he associated with capitalism. The conservative outlook of Bell is reflected in his book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* where he argues that the decline in the protestant work ethic gave birth to a decadent modernist culture. “The protestant work ethic and the puritan temper were codes that emphasized work sobriety, frugality and sexual restraint, and a forbidding attitude to life;” (55) however, by 1960’s in America, people no longer carried this ethic and temper. According to Bell, the increasing influence of the market on cultural matters was responsible for the erosion of these long cherished, traditional bourgeois values. The erosion took place long ago, much before the 1960’s. “The breakup of the traditional bourgeois value system, in fact was brought about by the bourgeois economic system
Sociologists like Bell worried more about the cultural outcome of capitalism. More importantly, the worry centred round the question of ethics and morality. This is seen in the attitude of Bell who has nothing against the working of capitalism per se but everything against the culture that is associated with it. Such reactions are undoubtedly the result of conservative thinking but Bell has no qualms admitting it. He argues that modernity as an impulse drove man towards the realization of the self: “the western ideal of the autonomous man who in becoming self-determining would achieve freedom” (Bell 16). According to him, the impulse or will to self-realization is expressed similarly in both the economic and the cultural world. Whereas in the realm of economics it resulted in the rise of “the bourgeois entrepreneur,” in the realm of culture it gave rise to “the independent artist” (16). “In the development of culture, this search for independence, the will to be free not only of patron but of all conventions, finds its expression in modernism” (16). In his view, the culture of capitalism found expression in the freedom enjoyed by the modern artist. The crucial point here however, is the link that he establishes between capitalism and culture. The growth of capitalism and its resultant impact on society is perceived as the entrepreneurial nature of the western man which is meant to lead him towards self-realization.

This search for greater self-realization pushed the independent artist towards newer horizons and he began to explore these with greater freedom and creative energy than ever before. Bell is bitter about such developments and argues that “the modern movement has been united by rage against the social order as the first cause,
and a belief in the apocalypse as the final cause” (51). The effort of the modernist artist to find a justification of life in art in an ultimate “effort to transcend himself,” (51) shifts the emphasis from the work of art to the artist. According to Bell, this could have disastrous consequences for morality and ethics and hence he argues that “Traditional modernism sought to substitute for religion or morality an aesthetic justification of life; to create a work of art, to be a work of art” (51).

The reactionary response of Bell to the cultural contradiction of modernism provokes a stringent response from Habermas. He suggests that for a neoconservative like Bell “culture in its modern form stirs up hatred against the conventions and virtues of everyday life, which has become rationalized under the pressures of economic and administrative imperatives (Modernity- An Incomplete Project 6). Habermas argues that “Bell places the burden of responsibility for the dissolution of the protestant ethic (a phenomenon which had already disturbed Max Weber) on the ‘adversary culture’” (6). As Habermas rightly points out, the neoconservative faced a problem of reinstating norms in a society that was fast losing “the ethic of discipline and work” (6). How could one revive the protestant ethic in an age that was rebelling against all norms? Habermas concludes that “Bell sees a religious revival to be the only solution” (7). However, there seems to be no signs of such a revival at present though, there is some approval of the postmodern in Vatican circles. As Harvey in The Condition of Postmodernity points out: “no less a person than Pope John Paul II has entered the fray on the side of the postmodern.” (41) Therefore one can propose that there are at least two prominent positions on late modernism: one of the cultural right and another of the cultural left.
History was not kind to modernism, for the ambition of modernists to conflate their moment in history as the most significant moment didn’t actually happen; instead history turned back at modernity with a vengeance to expose the hidden structures of Bourgeois art. “Bourgeois art had two expectations at once from its audiences. On the one hand, the layman who enjoyed art had to educate himself to become an expert. On the other hand, he should also behave like a competent consumer who uses art and relates aesthetic experiences to his own life problems” ("Modernism - An Incomplete Project"12). These expectations were aimed at reappropriating art to the modes of practical life which Habermas prefers to term the project of modernity. Since such tendencies continue to prevail even in contemporary times, he suggests that modernity is, as yet, an ‘incomplete project’. “In sum, the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled and the reception of art is only one of at least three of its aspects”(13). From a Habermasian perspective, the project of modernity that aimed at “a differentiated relinking with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism,” (13) could have been completed only if there was a parallel development of societal modernization in a direction away from capitalist modernization. However, he does not express the hope of such a possibility since western civilization is steeped too deeply in the mess of capitalist modernization. A climate has developed “in the entire Western world” that “furthers capitalist modernization processes as well as trends critical of cultural modernism” (13). A relinking would be possible only “under the condition that societal modernization will also be steered in a different direction” (13). One can hardly disagree with Habermas’ view because the current trends in global capitalism do not show any signs of relinking with “vital heritages,” (13) and neither are there signs of a lasting credible alternative. Moreover, societal
modernization in the West seems to have adopted a reinvented individualism that seeks to defy all such categories that show affinity for aggregates.

Modernism as a cultural form of the bourgeoisie wins critics of various types: conservatives, liberals and also Marxists. The exception with Marxists though is that they are critical of the social conditions that result from capitalism but pay little heed to the subsequent cultural development. After all, culture belongs to the superstructure in orthodox Marxism theory. Unlike the Marxists however, Bell finds no fault with the radicalism in economics which gave rise to capitalism. On the contrary, he tries to push the blame on what he perceives as a negative cultural development – modernism – onto capitalism itself. Neo-conservatism Habermas writes “shifts onto cultural modernism the uncomfortable burdens of a more or less successful capitalist modernization of the economy and society” (7). Bruce Robbins affirms Habermas’s view in his article titled “Disjoining the Left” by pointing out that “Bell and other neo-conservatives attempt to blame culture for effects that originate not in culture but in capitalism. It is the scapegoating of culture, made possible by the apparent disjuncture of realms that allows them to protect capitalism itself from radical critique” (Robbins 32).

Modernism is the only complex theory that explains the growth of the modern industrial-capitalist nation-state. It can also be understood as a movement that recognized the bourgeoisie as a class. The modernists were overtly ambitious and firm in the correctness of their belief, and least wary about the internal contradictions of modernity. Habermas suggests that: “The idea of modernity is intimately tied to the development of European art, but what I call “the project of modernity” comes only into focus when we dispense with the usual concentration upon art” (Modernity – An
Incomplete Project 8). He argues that modernity can be properly understood only when we analyze its close connection with the project of enlightenment. According to him, “The project of modernity formulated by the philosophers of the enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic” (9). Enlightenment thinkers like Condorcet had “the extravagant expectation” (9) that the arts and sciences would promote “not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self…and even the happiness of human beings” (9). No philosophical or political project so far had dared to hold out such promises to human kind.

However, such optimism was destined to meet its end in the 20th century. The almost utopian dream of the enlightenment philosophers was shattered when the highly differentiated segments working autonomously, developed as specialized spheres cut off from the practical rationality of everyday existence. As a result, in the cultural sphere, there were efforts made to “negate the culture of expertise” (9). This can be understood as the Postmodern Turn where the experts in the arts, especially, tried to reconnect aesthetics to everyday life by negating cultural modernism. Habermas expresses dissatisfaction with such a move, while raising doubts about the total rejection of the intentions of enlightenment thinkers by linking them to cultural modernism. He argues that a historical understanding alone will reveal the contradictions of modernity for “historically, aesthetic modernity is only a part of cultural modernity in general” (10).

The beginning of aesthetic modernism can be traced to Charles Baudelaire’s seminal essay “The painter of Modern Life” (1863). “Modernity”, he wrote, “is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal
and the immovable” (Baudelaire 17). It must be admitted that such concepts of aesthetic modernity came from the larger transformations that took place in the modes of artistic representation and techniques of production in the middle of the 19th century. Walter Benjamin provides the most significant insights into the concept of a work of art in his path breaking article titled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Benjamin argues that the work of art, in its traditional conception, carried with it two important characteristics: its uniqueness and its aura. However, with the possibility of multiple reproductions, the work of art lost its unique existence for, “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (Benjamin 221). Further, when the work of art was detached from its age-old link with tradition it also lost its “aura” (221). Benjamin identifies the original link between art and ritual that often found its expression in ‘cult’ and later came to be associated with religion. However, the ritualistic function of art began to wane when it moved out of privately enclosed public spaces, such as the Royal court and the cathedral with limited public viewership, into a secular public space where its exhibition value gained more importance than its use value in ritual. Therefore, with the de-linking of art from its original function in ritual, it loses its aura, while with the truly revolutionary means of reproduction like photography; art had to face its first deep crisis on the question of authenticity.

According to Benjamin, art carried certain uniqueness as long as it found a cultic function in early rituals “the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult” (223). The earliest art works “originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind” (223). He suggests that art could lay claim to authenticity only when it retained its uniqueness: “the unique value of the
‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (224). This ritualistic cult function of art gradually began to decline owing to “the secular cult of beauty, developed during the Renaissance” (224). This secular cult has prevailed for more than three centuries now, and “with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism, art sensed the approaching crisis which has become evident a century later” (224). At that point of time in the history of Western art practices, “art reacted with the doctrine of l’art pour l’art that is with a theology of art” (224). However, according to Benjamin, this turned out to be “a negative theology in the form of the idea of ‘pure’ art” (224). And in poetry, “Mallarme was the first to take this position” (224). Discussing the impact of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin suggests that the question of authenticity becomes more and more an inauthentic proposition when, “from a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints” (224). This was another crucial challenge that modernity posed to art. It changed the concept of art from artistic creation to artistic production, thus considerably undermining the centrality of the artist in the process of art production.

These radical changes prompted Theodor W. Adorno to write in his Aesthetic Theory that “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist” (1). The surrealists denied ‘the right of art to exist’, even while modernist art was trying hard to re-establish contact with society by trying to fulfill the promise of happiness it had advanced earlier. However, things had gone too far and “by the time of Baudelaire, the utopia of reconciliation with society had gone sour. A relation of opposites had come into being; art had become a critical mirror showing the irreconcilable nature of the aesthetic and social worlds” (Modernity – An Incomplete Project 10).
Habermas advances the proposition of Adorno who argued in *Aesthetic Theory* that “The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure” (Adorno1). On the other hand, the process that these movements initiated became a self-consuming effort which destroyed the very same categories it had set out to establish. Pointing out the contradictory relationship that art unwittingly builds with society the more it tries to relate to it, Adorno writes that “absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole” (1). He argues that art began to enjoy autonomy after it “freed itself from its cultic function and its images” (1). However, this autonomy of art “was nourished by the idea of humanity,” (1) but as society turned less and less human, “this autonomy was shattered” (1). “All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function – of which art is itself uncertain and expresses its own uncertainty – are doomed. Indeed art’s autonomy shows signs of blindness” (1). Adorno is here referring to “the classical avant-garde’s project to reunite the artificially separated realms of culture and society” (Hyussen 224). Adorno’s argument demonstrates that all attempts made by the avant-garde to bridge the ever growing gulf between a specialized world of art and the mundane world of material processes, ended as futile experiments in expressing subjective experiences. This can be seen as the actual failure of modernism: the significant failure that allows the postmodernists to declare the end of modernism.

Almost every modernist artist who began to perceive the imminent death of art in the new technological development of mechanical reproduction experienced this loss of a claim to authenticity. Jon R. Snyder in his introduction to Vattimo’s book titled *The End of Modernity* writes, “After Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of
God, Vattimo infers, it may legitimately be said that the ‘true nature’ of all value is exchange value; and it is into this flux of values that the traditional metaphysical being has today begun to dissolve and disappear. In the era of philosophical nihilism nothing can stand outside the realm of universal equivalence or lay claim to ‘authenticity’” (Snyder xxi). Modernist art had to face the biggest challenge of laying claims to authenticity. Moreover, with the growing trends of publicity that came to be an important feature of modernist discourse especially with the advent of print journalism, art had no choice but to admit its value only in terms of exhibition. Therefore, for the first time in its history, art is conceived merely as a mode of representation without any claims to uniqueness or aura. In the bargain, art became more self-reflexive and self-referential and finally came to dwell an ivory tower existence. Modernism had to grapple with difficult questions about the subject of art, the relationship between the work of art and the artist and the social relevance of art.

Aesthetic modernism was fraught with inherent contradictions and tensions. These tensions had their roots in occidental theories of aesthetics that go back in history to the philosophical ruminations of Kant and Hegel. Later this German philosophical tradition finds its continuation in the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Therefore, it is necessary to focus primarily on philosophical foundations of modernist aesthetics if one has to comprehend postmodernism’s opposition to modernism. Proclamations like ‘the death of art’ or ‘the end of history’ are based in the western metaphysical tradition that always carried teleological notions of history. Are such claims indeed valid? Or are they simply strategies adopted by postmodernists eager to declare the end of modernism?
The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo agrees with the prophetic ideas of Hegel on the future technological developments in advanced industrial society that will bring about the death of art. He suggests that the technological development of communication and mass media has rendered “the universe of representations diffused” in such a way that it “can no longer be distinguished from reality” (Vattimo 51). Holding a view similar to that of Baudrillard he argues that “the realm of the mass media is not the Hegelian absolute spirit; it is instead perhaps a caricature of it” (51). Nonetheless, he insists that any discussion on ‘the death of art’ can take place only “within the framework of this effective perverted realization of the Hegelian absolute spirit” (51). For him, working within the framework of the Hegelian absolute is the same as “speaking within the framework of an accomplished metaphysics that has arrived at its end” (52). Vattimo’s purposive argument draws very strongly from the line undertaken by Nietzsche and Heidegger before him who had vigorously devalued the metaphysical thought that had come down to them through the Judeo-Christian tradition. Invoking Nietzsche’s declaration of the ‘death of God’, he suggests that the ‘death of art’ could only be the logical outcome of Western metaphysics which from its inception carried an “eschatological notion of history” (52) with it. Therefore for him, “The death of art is a phrase that describes, or better still, constitutes the epoch of the end of metaphysics as prophesied by Hegel, as lived by Nietzsche and as registered by Heidegger” (52).

Fred Dallmeyr takes up for discussion Habermas’s book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) in his article titled “The Discourse of Modernity: Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Habermas.” He suggests that “In Habermas’s presentation, the discourse was inaugurated by enlightenment thinkers from Descartes to Voltaire and first crystallized in the rationalist theories of Kant and Fichte”
In Kantian thought, “modernity meant basically the progressive refinement of consciousness and subjectivity;” (60) in other words, it was the segregation of reason into different domains of “science, ethical freedom and aesthetic judgment” (60). This segregation was achieved quite easily without any “costs or charring effects” (60). However, the neglect of these costs led to “dissent or insurgency in the modern discourse” (60) in the sense that analytical rationalism was joined by a counter-discourse of rational synthesis. This insurgency found its chief voice in Hegel’s system. Hegel sought to counter the divisions that resulted from modernity without abandoning the modern project. He “sought to reconcile the dichotomies of ‘nature and spirit’, ‘sensuality and reason’…‘finitude and infinity’, ‘knowledge and faith’”(60). However, this insurgency turned out to be a flawed experiment “mainly because of its subjectivist moorings and its excessively theoretical - contemplative character” (60). During the 19th century, this legacy of Hegel was continued by two opposing camps of “‘Young Hegelians’ and ‘Right Hegelians’.”(60)

But, there was another insurgency that turned out to be more interesting than the one that arose due to the “internal modulations of modernity, (60) and this insurgency or anti-discourse sought “not so much to modify as to cancel the modern project”(60). As Dallmeyr rightly points out, the chief architect of this anti-discourse was none other than Nietzsche who “figures as the turning point or as the ‘turn-table’ (Drehscheibe) ushering in the move from modernity to postmodernism” (60). Nietzsche was quick to see the antithetical forces at play between the Young and Right Hegelians and successfully unmasked the “dramaturgy of their plot” (68). And in doing so, “Nietzsche is also said to have challenged its basic thematic content: the themes of reason and enlightenment” (68). Nietzsche marshaled “the spirit of
modernity…against the objectivism of Hegel’s philosophy of history,” (69) just as many young Hegelians did. He stands out as the most prominent enlightenment philosopher who, at a crucial point in the history of western philosophy decided “to bid farewell to the Hegelian tradition and to modern philosophy as such” (69).

Nietzsche’s departure from the modern enlightenment does not however mean “a return or regression to a mythical past, but rather carries a utopian futuristic cast” (Dallmeyr 69). And therefore, as Dallmeyr proposes: “In his futuristic leanings Nietzsche is said to have pushed modernity towards postmodernism – a circumstance reflected in his treatment of modern art” (69). Nietzsche’s preoccupation was with “the discordance of art and truth,” (Bernstein 1) in the face of which he “felt holy dread” (1). However, as Bernstein rightly points out, this schism “is as old as philosophy itself” (1). It goes back in the history of western philosophy to “Plato’s challenge to the authority of Homer, and with the expulsion of the poets from the republic that was to be grounded in reason, truth, alone” (1). This challenge to art from Plato and the “expulsion of the poets from the republic,” “constitute modernity even more emphatically than they did Plato’s philosophical utopia” (1).

Art and aesthetics react immediately and try to develop their own perspective of modernity to challenge modernist perspectives of truth. Such a tendency occurs “primarily through philosophies of art that take artistic phenomena more than a matter of taste, as more than ‘merely’ aesthetic phenomena” (2). Nietzsche’s aesthetics is one such philosophy of art, a “post-aesthetic philosophy” that employs artistic theories “in order to challenge truth only cognition” (4). These theories tend to “locate the meaning and being of art in its cognitive dimension, thus connecting or reconnecting art and truth” (4). The philosophers of art, by “denying positivism” and “the
separation of domains” deny “science’s claim for hegemony over questions of truth” (4). The history of art shows us that it always supported claims of “art’s cognitive potential” (4) for representing truth. And this truth was the one upheld by Christian metaphysics. However, modern art claims autonomy for itself and declares that the “experience of art…is precisely the experience of art as cut off and separated from truth” (4). The modernists claim that autonomous art is “art that is autonomous from (rationalized) truth and morality” (4). Bernstein asserts that “This is the historical truth… the truth underlying Nietzsche’s holy dread, and it provides us with the first hint as to how the discordance of art and truth comes to stand as a sign of modernity” (4).

This truth also explains Nietzsche’s nostalgic retreat to the pre Socratic Alexandrian world and his attempt to retrieve the Dionysian element from mythology. His anti-modernist stance took him into a completely different world of “subjectivity removed from all limiting rules of cognition and instrumental activity, from all imperatives of utility and ethics” (Dallmeyr 71). Dallmeyr justifies the charge of subjectivity that Habermas makes against Nietzsche. He also admits an even more serious charge against Nietzsche, that is, his “presumed irrationalism or his abandonment of rational standards – particularly the standards erected by modern epistemology and ethics” (71). Nietzsche, therefore, is primarily responsible for created an epistemological crisis in Western metaphysics by attempting to retrieve the archaic Dionysian spirit through an aesthetic renewal of mythology.

Kaufmann argues that “Nietzsche and Hegel were both primarily concerned about the realm of Absolute Spirit, i.e., art, religion, and philosophy, and both evaluated the State in terms of its relation to these higher pursuits. Hegel had praised
the State because he thought that it alone made possible these supra-social enterprises; Nietzsche condemned the State as their archenemy” (Kaufmann123). Nietzsche was not the first German philosopher to reject Kant’s postulate of a moral order based on reason. Hegel had criticized Kant’s postulate before him and had “elevated art into the realm of Absolute Spirit while morality was included in that of Objective Spirit” (123). Kant’s idea of nature where “no extramundane deity makes its appearance” (126) was typical of much enlightenment thought though he never rejected the idea of god. However, “Nietzsche could not accept unquestioned” (126) the concept of nature proposed by Kant. Nonetheless, there is a definite difference between Hegel and Nietzsche vis-à-vis the grounds on which they reject Kant’s metaphysical postulate. According to Habermas, Hegel and his followers tried to radicalize enlightenment thought by placing “their hope in a dialectic of enlightenment in which reason was validated as an equivalent power of religion” (“The Entry into Postmodernity” 83). However, they did not succeed in their attempts. And, as Habermas rightly points out “with Nietzsche’s entry into the discourse of modernity, the argument shifts from the ground up” (85).

But Heidegger, as Habermas points out, wishes to “take over the essential motifs of Nietzsche’s Dionysian messianism while avoiding the aporias of a self-enclosed critique of reason” (97). Nietzsche had pursued a goal of overcoming reason by a “self-consuming critique of ideology,” (97) and Heidegger seeks to reach the same goal “through a destruction of western metaphysics that proceeds immanently” (97). Heidegger is convinced like Hegel that “art reached its essential end with romanticism,” (98) and hence he has no problems “in imagining the leveling of the ‘aesthetic phenomenon’ and the assimilation of art to metaphysics” (98). He thought that the beautiful will “allow being to show forth” (98). By ontologizing art this way,
he tries to bring back to philosophy what it had lost to “art in romanticism” (98). As a result, he foists an onerous task on western philosophy: the task of “creating an equivalent for the unifying power of religion, in order effectively to counter the diremptions of modernity” (98-99). One can conclude that the movement initiated by Nietzsche comes full circle with Heidegger. Further, this philosophical tradition that sought to cut at the roots of the critique of reason (Kant) finds its continuation in postmodernism’s critique of enlightenment reason.

The Postmodernists announce the end of modernism suggesting that the creative energy of modernism has now exhausted. They argue that history has proved the promise of emancipation of enlightenment philosophers wrong. In that sense, Nietzsche can be considered as one of the earliest postmodern philosophers who did not have any great regard for scientific historiography. While rejecting the Kantian aesthetic with its concept of disinterestedness in art, he attacked both the eschatological and the scientific approach to history. He refused to admit Hegel’s proposition that the sovereign power of history was the only real thing that subordinated everything else to its universal power. Congdon Lee suggests that “Nietzsche was outraged by such a philosophy because it subordinated a quality of life to the projects of the historical process” (Lee 212). He held the view that great men were always able to transcend the limiting force of history with their nobility.

The historical developments of the 19th century that saw the unprecedented growth of science and technology was undoubtedly the product of enlightenment rationality. The ambition of achieving such progress led many enlightenment thinkers to develop and project a new knowledge system and social organization that would ensure the achievement of the goals of progress. As David Harvey suggests:
“Enlightenment thought embraced the ideas of progress, and actively sought that break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains. It took Alexander Pope’s injunction, ‘the proper study of mankind is man’, with great seriousness” (Harvey 13). However, these ideas of enlightenment which promised the emancipation and progress of all humankind came to be questioned in the second half of the twentieth century only after Europe saw ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Hiroshima’. For the first time in the history of Europe, doubts were raised about the power of modernism “to inform and inspire contemporary thought and action” (13).

Among the enlightenment thinkers were men like Rousseau who believed that “Mankind will have to be forced to be free” (14); there were others like Bacon who believed that the world “would soon be a utopia where great people – the guardians of knowledge – would be guiding others in ethics and morality” (14). Some others opposed an aggressive individualism of great thinkers to this vision of Bacon. However, it is people like Adam Smith who looked at the developments as an emergence of a market trend that would ultimately benefit all humankind. Marx, while studying the development of early capitalism, saw in it the contradiction of class out of which universal human emancipation might eventually emerge. He believed that the class-bound logic of capitalism would inevitably lead to a class-struggle from which the proletariat would emerge victorious to establish an egalitarian workers’ society. It must be admitted that Marx himself was “a child of enlightenment thought” (14). There is no doubt that all these thinkers were over ambitious about the future course of enlightenment and they were eager to establish their knowledge in
Critics of modernity launched a bitter attack even as early as the 19th century: “if Burke made no effort to hide his disgust at the excesses of the French revolution, Malthus, rebutting Condorcet’s optimism, argued the impossibility of ever escaping the chains of natural scarcity and want” (15). And so, Weber’s dissatisfaction with rational organization stemmed from the fear that purposive rationality might end up disenchancing the world and pushing the human ‘self’ into an abyss where he will no longer be able to create meanings or make meaningful interpretations of his existence. He was anxious about the direction that modernity would take dominated by enlightenment reason. Weber was afraid that a rationalized social environment would expect individuals to realize themselves only in relation to objective material practices. According to Eyal Chowers, “The threats of disenchantment, of a rationalized social environment and of meaninglessness dominate Weber’s work because he views human beings as creatures who desire meaning in their lives and are able to invent it” (Chowers 123). Weber’s belief is typically positivist and stands in contradiction with Nietzsche’s thinking. Nietzsche, in his “philosophy of nihilism shattered the last hopes for religious and metaphysical consolation, thereby suggesting the possible meaninglessness of human existence” (123). This is one of the most important and crucial paradoxes of modernity which ultimately resulted in its own exhaustion. The radical transformation of the objective world would produce new meanings. Old meanings would naturally degenerate in course of time. This was a challenge to essentialist thinkers like Weber who believed that the human self, rooted in a religious culture, was able to produce meanings of his own. Weber calls this self the personality and argues that it “emerged due to modifications in religious
experience that are distinctive of the West, and it is characterized by its aspiration for a unifying and meaningful interpretation of its being” (123).

The significant difference between Weber and Nietzsche is that, while the former was worried about the hermeneutic self being mercilessly dislodged from the traditionally assured meaningful centre, the latter in a more threatening tone, asserted his belief in a Dionysian self that, consciously or otherwise, chooses destruction in its everlasting desire for the new. “Nietzsche plunged totally into the other side of Baudelaire’s formulation in order to show that the modern was nothing more than a vital energy, the will to live and the will to power, swimming in a sea of disorder, anarchy, destruction” (Harvey 15). Harvey suggests that for Nietzsche: “the only path to affirmation of self was to act, to manifest will, in this maelstrom of creative destruction and destructive creation even if the outcome was bound to be tragic” (16). Modernity lived with this tension between a self that was so far governed by beliefs that assured a sense of moral and ethical certitude, and a self that was being dragged and sucked into a brave new world of contingent needs.

Enlightenment rationality threatened to dislodge the ‘self’ from essential meanings with moral justification. The inability of modern man to make sense of the world around him is one of the biggest crises of modernity. This signaled a crisis for western philosophy also. Therefore, as Chowers suggests in the article “Max Weber and the homo hermeneut,” “the contemporary Western crisis of meaninglessness has its origin in the internal movement of Occidental religions but is aggravated by the self’s existence within the objectifying environment of capitalism, bureaucracy and science” (Chowers 124). In a “fragmented and disenchanted world,” Weber sees the self “as situated among various and increasingly conflicting domains of action and
value” (124). Modernity deriving from this hermeneutics was creating a world of confused meanings for moral and ethical philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries. It made the possibility of generating and formulating ethical principles difficult for the Occidentalist for whom his Salvationist beliefs had assured him sense for both this and other worldly ambitions. Further, it also made “the preservation of unity in human life a tenuous project” (124). Therefore, the enlightenment came to be regarded as the single, most potent threat to the unity of the self and to the preservation of a universal morality through culture. This can be labeled as the modernist predicament of a moral self caught in the throes of an increasingly rationalizing and technologizing world.

The sense of meaninglessness that thinkers as different as Weber and Nietzsche experienced was, in fact, the dominant feeling of modernism. Weber weakly believed that it was possible to arrive at a set of ultimate values by careful cultivation of the self in an “impersonal but rule-governed environment,” even as he rejected ideas of “radical re-moulding of society” and the “merits of socialism” (125). Nietzsche however, as he elaborates in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), believed that the age of nihilism was the inevitable outcome of “the teleological movement of Christian history,” (125) and the only way to overcome it was by making determined efforts at achieving a “supra-historical aesthetic consciousness” (125). In order to achieve this he tried to “rework the metaphysical postulates of the ancient Greek existence as becoming and existence as being and made extraordinary efforts to unite the two” (125). According to him, by such efforts alone could one “transcend the goal less becoming of history” (125). Such a response to the plight of the modern self can be understood only when one places both Weber and Nietzsche in the intellectual period of their time. It was a time when many German intellectuals were caught between “two opposing political and philosophical options” (125). While Marxism proposed
the possibility of a new social and economic organization which would not only
eliminate material deprivation but also ensure an egalitarian communal life, Nietzsche
was suggesting a different remedy by expressing the hope that the situation could be
overcome by “cultivating an aesthetic self, one capable of generating contingent
evaluations of its life while withdrawing from the contaminating forces of modern
culture” (125). Weber “declined both of these solutions” (125). He saw a section of
people caught in the conflict of choice, “those who had abandoned the old gods
without turning to socialism or to the aristocracy of artistry,” and chose to address
them. They were the people in “freedom’s empty space.” (125)

From the arguments presented above, one can very well argue that the internal
tensions of modernism forced a critical engagement with philosophy. A need to
legitimize modernism as a philosophical discourse arose among the modernists.
However, in reality, it was a need to feel secure by legitimizing the feeling of
insecurity. Although it was not so much an attempt to establish it as a new praxis or a
new discourse, the modernists sought to reiterate the newness of their times by way of
showing difference with the previous age. In consequence, they had to adopt a mode
that was self-reflexive. In doing so, they had to continuously refer to their own times
as the unending present even as history was constantly accumulating their times as
unending past. This effort demanded that the boundaries that marked the pre modern
past had to be continuously transgressed in order to establish the present as modern.
This, in effect, resulted in the institutionalization of transgression which came to be
identified as one of significant features of modernism. Commenting on such features
of modernism John Tate writes that “they also include the self-renewing nature of a
modern self-consciousness its inherently transgressive qualities, and its continual need
to demarcate its own distinctively modern ‘present’ from what is an ever-increasing
‘pre-modern past’”(Tate 282). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that in trying to be different from their immediate predecessors, the modernists attempted a historical break with traditional European, positivist thinking. The modernists began with good intentions of representing their technological age as ‘modern’, probably without realizing that the future age which was yet to come would declare the end of modernity itself.

However, who could legitimately declare the end of modernity? Calling an end to a powerful movement like modernity would create an epistemological crisis in Western philosophy. Postmodernism emerges from such a philosophical crisis that stemmed around the 1970’s, from a collapse of episteme and epistemological paradigms following the post-structuralist wave that struck Paris after 1968. Postmodernist thinking, as we already know, is obsessed with ‘ends’. But unlike other ends like the death of the author, end of the subject or end of history, philosophy’s end was granted an immediate reprieve “in the same breath as its death sentence was pronounced” (Sheenan 20). This allowed philosophy “the possibility of renewal,” (20) as well as finding new ways of accomplishing its tasks under the given circumstances. The post-war French philosophers like Guattari, Deleuze and Derrida resist the declaration of the end of philosophy. They also commonly share “a resistance to totality…to teleology…and to closure of any kind of narrative, conceptual, metaphysical” (21). The chief advocates of these in Western philosophical tradition are Descartes and Hegel. If Descartes’ radical scepticism “led to the foundationalist claim that a final beginning could be made,” (21) Hegel’s synthetic approach “organized the entire tradition into a purposive and dialectical whole, and then assumed that it had reached its apogee with no further work to be done” (21). And the postmodernists challenge these philosophical notions arguing that philosophical
thinking cannot be “conveyed in the language of proposition and logical argument” (22). This is one strand of postmodern thinking that tries to negate the orthodoxy of Western philosophy.

Another strand moves tenuously into a different metaphysical tradition. Sheenan rightly suggests that one of the key aspects of this tradition the postmodernists wish to negate is “the method of metaphysical speculation and argument” (22). It was Immanuel Kant who gave a concise critique of this tradition in his *Critique of pure reason* (1871). But the postmodernists, “operating in a post-Kantian context,” (22) try to resist what Kant had so meticulously developed. Therefore Sheenan suggests that they reject metaphysics and take a turn towards language. This turn towards language, so famously edified in Lyotard, comes as a posthumous legacy from Wittgenstein. Postmodernism borrows his terminology like “language games, family resemblance, forms of life, private language argument,” (23) and assimilates and reworks them “in its own image” (23). In a similar tone, Heidegger speaks about the language of poetry as a possible means of solving the problems of modernism. Both these philosophers who belong to the analytical tradition propose a “linguistic turn in philosophy” (23) and contend that “the limits of philosophy and that of what was understood to be ‘reality,’ could manifest themselves only within language” (23). Thus, analytical philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger effectively reverse the inward-looking philosophy of Descartes. In fact, it was Descartes who had shifted the focus of philosophy from its usual inclination towards metaphysical contemplation to the world of ideas. But now it was a different turn: “a turn from ideas to words, from an idealist philosophical focus to a language-centered one” (23).
The postmodernists appropriate this linguistic turn to argue that it is impossible to represent any reality through language since the latter is itself “riven with figuration” (23). They declare that language “cannot represent the world with any degree of accuracy” (23). However, in a strangely dubious move they also claim that “language constructs human identity rather than vice versa” (23). This is the most crucial contradiction in the philosophical positioning of the postmodernists. They first demolish epistemological foundations of philosophy in the name of language and later use the same language to build their own philosophy. From here, it is rather easy to trace philosophy’s route to the American philosopher, Richard Rorty. As Sheenan rightly points out: “the two currents of Wittgenstein and Heidegger converge in the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty” (24). Philosophy was able to transform itself into a “theory of language,” only because it was able to establish “a certain congruence or ‘fit’, between mind and world” (24).

However, for Rorty, knowledge is not so much about congruence as it is about “social acceptance” (24). It is “what receives communal support or assent from one’s peers” (24). Therefore, Rorty’s own philosophy is not about the end of philosophy but about the end of epistemology. His project is to replace philosophy with conversation strategies – something through which one can establish better human contacts. This pragmatic philosophy is an effort to revert back to communitarianism of the middle ages in a Post-Marxist era where the “spectres of Marx,” as Derrida suggests, begin to haunt the neo-liberal bourgeoisie of the West. Hence Sheenan condemns Rorty’s post philosophical project as “a genuine anomaly, seeking humanist ends (ethical improvement) through counter-humanist means (discourse rather than knowledge)” (24). In the absence of metaphysics and humanisms, both liberal and Marxist, philosophy returns on the scene in the form of a weakly appealing neo-conservative
reaction to a fast failing religious and moral collective conscience. Philosophy, once again tries to speak the language of religion, propagating old universals like the Christian brotherhood of God, assuming that the materialist theories of Marx and Freud are now longer valid. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that postmodernism cannot claim the status of philosophy when it actively seeks to destroy its epistemological edifice.

However, the neo-conservative stand has the full approval of the Pope who joins the postmodern debate by making a significant intervention into the neo-liberal political space that is readily made available to him in a uni-polar world. It comes as an attack on the secular philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which was perceived by the Vatican as having caused irreparable harm to European civilization by creating a moral crisis in a “self without God” (Harvey 41). This, according to Pope John Paul II was undoubtedly the result of enlightenment thought which consistently affirmed the individual self, and, “in the end negated itself because reason, a means, was left, in the absence of God’s truth, without any spiritual or moral goal” (41). In philosophy, therefore, the crisis in empirical thought created a highly contested space where any number of liberal positions could crop up at their own free will. Postmodernism appears on the scene as a position of free will to define the absence of philosophical thought. It is clear then that “the postmodern theological project is to reaffirm God’s truth without abandoning the powers of reason” (41). This certainly is the biggest crisis in Western philosophy today. The intervention of religious figures in the postmodern debate makes the debate not only complex but also controversial.
Postmodernism, in theory, emerges from within the dialectical play between the internal contradictions of cultural modernism. These contradictions continue to shape the burden of its inheritance. Hal Foster in the introduction to his book *The Anti-Aesthetic* asks whether such a thing as postmodernism exists at all, and “if so, what does it mean? Is it a concept or a practice, a matter of local style or a whole new period or economic phase? What are its forms, effects, place?” (ix). The discussion that follows will attempt to answer these questions and also try to understand the various positions of the dominant players in the postmodern field. If the field of knowledge today is to be taken as an endless “Language game” (15) as spelt out by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, then are the postmodernists trying to play an ‘end game’ with the modernists?

Lyotard tries to argue that “the nature of the social bond” (14) is determined by “specific communication circuits” (15). He suggests that the communicative system invites every individual to participate in these language games by positioning him “at the post of sender, addressee or referent” (15). Lyotard chooses language games as his “methodical approach” to suggest that “the question of the social bond, insofar as it is a question, is itself a language game, the game of enquiry” (15). Ironically, we may be trying to locate the beginning of postmodernism even as, many in the West are already foreseeing its end. As Steven Conner points out in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*: “The first thing to be said of postmodernism, at this hour, after three decades of furious business and ringing tills, is that it must be nearing at an end” (Conner 1). However, he also goes on to add that, as in a game of chess where one can prolong the end by choosing how to end it. He suggests that “the sweet sorrow of taking leave of postmodernism may be delayed by some time yet” (1).
According to Anthony Giddens; “If we are moving into a phase of postmodernity, this means that the trajectory of social development is taking us away from the institutions of modernity towards a new and distinct type of social order” (46). This new type of social order is based on several assumptions – that the idea of rational knowledge is uncertain since one cannot determine anything with certainty, second that history itself cannot be teleological and finally, that the idea of progress as defined by modernity is unacceptable. Therefore, the postmodernists “had to abandon the notion of ‘‘critical overcoming’’ so central to the enlightenment critique of dogma” (47). Only then could they establish their knowledge claims as valid as against the knowledge claims of the enlightenment thinkers. The superiority of reason over instinct was something which both fascinated and disappointed the modernists. To overcome modernity would mean that you overcome the logic of reason. The postmodernists attempt to do exactly this. They try to invalidate scientific knowledge in order to establish their theory as a new knowledge form.

The argument of the Postmodernists begins with such an assumption. They declare that achieved progress cannot be considered as a movement that entails achievable progress. The claims of enlightenment thinkers that progress is determined by causal rationality, following the Cartesian dictum cogito ergo sum, is disputed by the postmodernists who argue that the progress of universal humanity need not necessarily be linked to scientific rationality. Therefore, they direct their arguments against the legitimizing power of scientific knowledge. Lyotard tries to do this in his influential book The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979). He wrote about the condition of postmodernity when commissioned by the government of Quebec to make a study of the status of knowledge in advanced industrial societies. Given the task of identifying and qualifying knowledge per se, Lyotard set himself the
task of determining the knowledge claims of different disciplines in the university. Therefore, engaging himself with the question of legitimation, he tries to argue that the knowledge that came to legitimate itself during the enlightenment period, had now lost its power of legitimation. He suggests that there can be logically two types of knowledge: one scientific and the other narrative. All types of knowledge legitimate themselves on their explanatory power. He agrees that the “cumulative” (*The Postmodern Condition*) aspect of “scientific and technical knowledge is never questioned” (7). However, having said that, he argues that “scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition with another kind of knowledge” which he prefers to call “narrative, in the interests of simplicity” (7).

Lyotard argues that knowledge is legitimated through strategic moves in language games. “The nature of the social bond,” (14) he argues, is determined by a series of language games. Talking about the conflicting paradigms of scientific and narrative knowledge he argues that “The scientist questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or proof” (27). According to Lyotard, the scientist classifies narrative statements “as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward…Narratives are fables, myths legends, fit only for women and children” (27). He concludes that every type of knowledge develops “its own rules to each game” (27). Contestations of knowledge, sadly for Lyotard, become merely a method of “language games” (15). The purpose of his argument lies in delegitimating particular discourses in the human sciences to ultimately prove their irrelevance. Lyotard attempts to build a new pseudo-science by using the same speculative spirit that forms the core of all rational science. In a crudely ironic way he says that speculation is “the name given the
discourse on the legitimation of scientific discourse” (33). This has an oblique reference to Marx who used science as a method in his materialist philosophy of history and direct reference to Hegel. Lyotard argues that the speculative philosophy of Hegel attempted to achieve a totality of knowledge by linking itself with rational empirical science. He mocks such effort as an attempt to “realize this process of totalization” (34). He launches a vicious attack against all such totalizing forms of knowledge.

Lyotard suggests that society is a system that functions according to certain principles ensuring “harmony between the needs and hopes of individuals and groups and the functions guaranteed by the system” (11). However, he suggests that this is “only a secondary component” (11) of the functioning of the system. “The true goal of the system…is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output – in other words, performativity” (11). Even when one talks about dysfunctions in the system such as “strikes, crisis, unemployment, or political revolutions,” (11) the reality is that the system is making “an internal readjustment” to ensure optimum performance. Lyotard argues that the most effective industrial societies have always functioned on the basis of such technocratic rationality. But the Marxists refuse to accept “this realism of systematic self-regulation” because they see in it the contradiction that justifies “the principle of class struggle” (12). According to Lyotard, Marxism is guided by “a different model of society and a different conception of the function of knowledge that can be produced by society and acquired by it” (12). In his view, this model of society was “born out of the struggles accompanying the process of capitalism’s encroachment upon traditional civil societies” (12). Lyotard critiques Marxism on the ground that it used the logic of technocratic rationality to build totalitarian societies. The social foundation of “the
principle of division or class struggle was blurred to the point of losing all its radicality” (13) by later Marxists of the Frankfurt school and consequently socialism was reduced to the “status of ‘utopia’ or ‘hope’”. (13) Lyotard suggests that “this breaking up of the grand narratives” is analyzed by some authors as “the dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates.” (13) However, he contends that “nothing of the kind is happening” (13) thereby implying that capitalism has managed to survive with its self-regulatory mechanisms.

Lyotard defines postmodernism thus: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation, corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it” (Lyotard xxiv). Lyotard’s appeal for delegitimating metanarratives is not without political motives. It reveals a new trend in western intellectualism that attempts to build a liberal-democratic consensus with neo-conservatism. As John Keane rightly points out in his article titled “The Modern Democratic Revolution,” “the fundamental socio-political importance of philosophical essays such as Lyotard’s lies in their potential call for the deepening of the democratic revolution first analyzed and defended by Tocqueville” (Keane 84). Keane is able show that “viewed from this paradoxical angle,” the type of “philosophical postmodernism” that Lyotard fervently tries to defend is not “a break with the modernization project” (84). On the other hand, it is break with “its socio-political ally” – Marxism – that always carried a political intention of renewing and “deepening of modernity’s democratic potential” (84). However, given the liberal-democratic-conservative consensus in the politics of the West today, it looks as if
incredulity might hold sway for some more time. Or, at least, hold until further notice, till such time of return of a radical political consciousness.

This view is shared by Terry Eagleton who in his essay “Capitalism, Modernism Postmodernism” suggests that Lyotard, “having grimly outlined the most oppressive aspects of capitalist performativity principle, has really nothing to offer in its place” (364). He contends that Lyotard and other postmodernists have nothing more to offer than an “anarchistic version of the very same epistemology” (364) they wish to destabilize. In other words, they reverse the epistemology of knowledge in the humanities only to find that the other side of it is even more disturbing. Hence, Eagleton suggests that the postmodernists offer “the guerrilla skirmishes of a ‘paralogism’ which might from time to time induce ruptures, instabilities, paradoxes and microcatastrophic discontinuities into this terroristic techno-scientific system” (364). This serves as a passive compensation for the crude realities of Late capitalism that they refuse to denounce. For, denouncing capitalism as we know very well, calls for a political engagement that goes beyond mere theoretical formulations. In fact, the postmodernists maintain an ominous silence on two very important metanarratives: Religion and Global Capitalism. Their silence on these subjects is arguably their politics and, with this silence, they proclaim the end of modernity.

For Lyotard both modernism and postmodernism become distinct cultural phases which he desires to see as “continuous with one another” (364). But this desire, according to Eagleton, is “in part, a refusal to confront the disturbing fact that modernism fell prey to institutionalization. Both phases are for Lyotard manifestations of that which escapes and confounds history with the explosive force of the Now, the ‘paralogic’ as some barely possible, mind boggling leap into free air
which gives the slip to the nightmare of temporality and global narrative” (364). This paralogic of the Now and the New is an attempt to break the continual movement of history. As a result, postmodernism turns out to be an ahistorical narrative; a supra metanarrative. Moreover, it borrows some elements of modernism like the fragmented or schizoid self, “but eradicates all critical distance from it” (373). It also takes from the avant-garde “the dissolution of art into social life, the rejection of tradition, an opposition to high culture,” (373) but in an ironic twist, cancels its radical political elements with “the unpolitical impulses of modernism” (373). This is the political contradiction of the culture of late capitalism.

According to Jameson, the culture of late capitalism is an entire body of popular styles that emerged in the post 60’s decades in Western Europe and America. In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” Jameson suggests that in architecture, postmodernism emerged as a reaction against the high modernist forms “of monumental buildings of international style” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 111). The postmodernists presented “the pop buildings and decorated sheds celebrated by Robert Venturi in his manifesto, Learning from Las Vegas” as against “the machine for modern living” (111) of La Corbusier. In painting, it was “Andy Warhol and his pop art” (111) exemplified by his famous painting Soup Cans. In music, it was seen in the “synthesis of classical and ‘popular’ styles found in composers like Philip Glass and Terry Riley and also punk and new wave rock with such groups as the Clash, the Talking Heads, and the Gang of Four” (111). In films, it was “everything that comes out of Godard – contemporary vanguard film and video – but also a whole new style of commercial or fiction films” (111). In fiction, the “works of William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Ishmael Reed” (111) stand out as apt examples of postmodern writing.
Jameson suggests that all of these forms emerged as “specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism against this or that dominant high modernism that conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network and the foundations” (111). The kind of high modernism that was considered shocking and scandalous by the old generation of the 60’s, was regarded by the new generation of the time as “the establishment and the enemy – dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new” (112). Therefore, postmodernism can be understood as a general tendency – a reaction against the already established forms of modernism. Jameson is right when he concludes that there can be “as many different forms of postmodernisms as there were high modernisms in place” (112). He also identifies the effacement “of some of the key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (112) as another important feature of postmodernism. Jameson argues that this was quite disturbing from “an academic stand-point” (112) since, the academy has always had “a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch” (112). This is an interesting observation which suggests that the academies always acted as the guardians of high culture. The postmodernists understood that the distinction between high and mass culture had to be removed, if they had to get rid of the tag of elitism that modernism carried. In order to achieve this, the postmodernists actively engage themselves in creating a new brand of hybrid culture by mixing the styles of high modernism and popular culture.

This attempt to create newer hybrid forms is reflected differently in the academy where effacement of defining boundaries forced a renewal of categories in the humanities. Postmodernism tries to posit itself as a new critical discourse by
trying to erase the older, yet more familiar categories of genre, discourse and philosophy. In post-war Europe of the 60’s where philosophy was losing its significance as a discipline, postmodernism emerged as an alternative discourse that attempts to explain everyday forms of late capitalist existence in terms of an apparently simple pragmatic philosophy. According to Jameson, a significant change in the formal features of culture in late capitalist societies can be observed around the 60’s in the west. As we already know, the new type of society that emerged around this time was variously termed as post-industrial, consumerist, multi-national or late capitalist. Jameson suggests that “This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the post war boom in the United States in the 1940s and early 50s or, in France, from the establishment of the fifth Republic in 1958. The 1960s are in many ways the key transitional period, a period in which the new international order (neocolonialism, the green revolution, computerization and electronic information) is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and by external resistance” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 113). This was an uneasy development where a new form of capitalism that Ernest Mandel termed Late Capitalism had begun to emerge in Western Europe and America, while in Eastern Europe socialism was showing the first signs of its inevitable end. And Jameson proposes that “postmodernism expresses the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism.” (113)

Jameson relates the mode of cultural representation of the late 20th century with the modes of capitalist over-production. He describes the significant features of the culture of late capitalism as “pastiche and schizophrenia” (113). For him, pastiche is a style of representation that becomes central to postmodernism. With the collapse of modernist paradigms of art, the mode of artistic representation faced a major crisis.
According to Jameson, the breakdown of modernist representative styles gave birth to “a host of distinct styles and mannerisms,” (114) which happened to be highly subjective expressions. Quite often, they were private expressions that could never conform to any categorical norms. This resulted in what he refers to as “stylistic diversity and heterogeneity” (114). Distinguishing between pastiche and parody, Jameson argues that in present times it is impossible to use parody because pastiche has taken over. However, the sad truth about pastiche is that it cannot create humour since it has already destroyed the object of humour. Whereas parody had the creative impulse of laughter and comedy, pastiche is bereft of that, “pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor.”(114)

Schizophrenia takes on a slightly different meaning in Jameson than what one sees in Jacques Lacan. Lacan’s conception links it with linguistics and looks at it as a language disorder. For Jameson however, the “schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence” (119). Here, Jameson’s theory correlates with the ‘image-commodity-sign’ chain of signification delineated by Jean Baudrillard. Quite obviously, he is referring to the breakdown of the chain of continuity which makes the experience of the present “overwhelmingly vivid and material” (120). “The world comes before the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy” (120). Jameson’s position on postmodernism, though useful in certain ways to critique the superficial eclecticism of postmodernism, fails to engage with the apolitical forms of its expression. He engages too deeply with the subjectivism of postmodernism in the process of developing a Marxist critique and as a result, gives short shrift to the
political content of Marxism. Jameson’s critique is a qualified Marxist response, a response drained of revolutionary politics.

A better Marxist response to postmodernism comes from Terry Eagleton. He takes up Jameson’s Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism for critiquing in his influential essay titled “Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism” (Eagleton 361). While he agrees with Jameson’s point about parody and pastiche and the difference between them, he suggests that “parody of a sort is not wholly alien to the culture of postmodernism” (361). However, it is important to see what is parodied by postmodernism when it has dissolved “art into the prevailing forms of commodity production” (361). Eagleton argues that postmodernism parodies the “revolutionary art of the twentieth century avant-garde” (361). Peter Burger argues in his theory of the avant-garde (1984) that one of the major revolutionary impulses of the avant-garde was to remove the institutional autonomy of art and “erase the frontiers between culture and political society and return aesthetic production to its humble unprivileged place within social practices as a whole” (Qtd. in Eagleton 361). In “The Negation of the Autonomy of Art” Burger argues that the European avant-garde movements was “an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society” (Burger 239). The avant-garde actively sought to negate not “an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men” (239). That is to say that the historical avant-garde attempted “to do away with the distance between art and life” (240). Hence, postmodern culture’s attempt to parody avant-garde practices is seen by Eagleton as “a sick joke at the expense of such revolutionary avant-gardism” (Eagleton 361). He argues that the dream of the avant-garde to integrate art and society “returns in monstrously caricatured form” (361) in the commodified art of the postmodern. The latest form of bourgeois culture – postmodernism – cynically mocks
the utopian desire of the avant-gardists to bring about a “fusion of art and social praxis” (362). While miming this socialist utopian desire, postmodernism empties the avant-garde dream “of its political content” (362).

The imaginative content of art drained of the political content, results in a depthlessness, which is one of the characteristics of postmodern art. The avant-garde was still able to shock its audience with irony whereas, “the depthless, styleless, dehistoricized, decathedced surfaces” (362) of postmodern culture do not “signify an alienation” (362). Neither does it seek to signify it because it is wholly incapable of signifying anything. It can only seek to posit the negation of something else. Hence, Eagleton is right when he argues that “the very concept of alienation must secretly posit a dream of authenticity which postmodernism finds quite unintelligible” (362). Modernist art functioned with some kind of awareness that at the deepest level, there was something of a “normative traditional humanism,” (362) which it tried to defy. But postmodernism does not carry any such idealist notions of normativity. Therefore, according to Eagleton, if the avant-garde’s utopian dream was to dissolve art into social life, the postmodernists dream of taking that dream further to its logical end. Late capitalism helps the postmodernists to achieve this end quite successfully; “late capitalism deftly inverts its own logic and proclaims that if the artifact is a commodity; the commodity can always be an artifact” (362). In a way, the postmodernists are able to level the utopian ambitions of the avant-garde and the capitalist realities of our times so that none will complain about binary oppositions like art and life, beauty and truth or fiction and fact. Therefore, as Eagleton appropriately suggests, the aesthetics of postmodernism is a parody of the “anti-representationalism” (363) of the avant-garde. It carries the logic of the avant-garde further to argue that there is no need for art to reflect any reality: “If art no longer
reflects, it is not because it seeks to change the world rather than mimic it, because there is, in truth, nothing there to be reflected, no reality which is not itself already image, spectacle, simulacrum, gratuitous fiction” (363).

In a world determined more and more by advanced communication networks, post modern subjects began to hide themselves behind the virtual masks of their own making. With science becoming praxis of everyday life, the boundary between fact and fiction, public and private became thinner, as the postmodern subject began to believe only the ‘make believe’ world of T.V images. The postmodern individual has already entered what Baudrillard so passionately refers to as the world of hyper-reality. Baudrillard centres his argument on the simulated world of images in his famous essay titled “Simulacra and Simulations” (1982). In a way, he extends his theory of commodity culture to the chain of images that forms a specific code for him. The T.V images and advertisements surround us from all sides leaving us hardly any room for imagining a real world beyond them. He argues that the advertisement images of commodities now no longer have a reference to the commodities they represent. The relation between the object and the image breaks down just as the boundary between the real and the simulacra. Mark Poster, in the introduction to the book Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings (2001) suggests that, for Baudrillard “No longer does the code take priority over, or even precede the consumer object. The distinctions between object and representation, thing and idea are no longer valid” (Poster 6).

Instead of looking at it as a process where the production of images has far surpassed that of commodities, Baudrillard “now discerns only a hyper reality, a world of self-referential signs.” (6) Baudrillard argues that in an age of computer
simulated images, “The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models – and with these it can be reproduced indefinite number of times” (“Simulacra and Simulations”170). Hence, the real is no longer rational since “it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance” (170). Such an argument throws up serious epistemological questions about the relation between the signifier and the signified. He argues that the object itself loses its power of signification once the image replaces the object as signifier. Such philosophizing obviously signals the worst crisis for Western metaphysical thought which always believed that a sign could be easily exchanged for meaning. Baudrillard suggests that “All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange – God, of course” (173). With scepticism similar to that of Nietzsche, who had earlier declared the death of God, Baudrillard asks: “But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs that attest his existence?” (173). He asserts that the whole system of meaningful signification through images collapses the moment the image becomes self-referential, “never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (173). For Baudrillard, capitalism has reached a stage of over-production and the individual subject is surrounded by an excess of images of commodities. Such a perception about the image substituting the real in a chain of signification is central to postmodern thinking. It creates an epistemological crisis that is similar to the one created by decentering meaning.

Derrida and Foucault had earlier questioned the structural nature of all linguistic discourse. If Foucault insisted upon the plurality of power-discourse
formations, Lyotard insists that all linguistic discourse is basically language games. These become the dominant principles of the postmodernists. By accepting an atomized society as the only possible reality resulting from a complex web of frequently changing communication networks that get established in different locales only to disappear as quickly as they appeared, the postmodernists create a dangerously disintegrated social scheme that is allowed to float freely on the chaotic metropolitan morass. Not surprisingly, the American philosopher Richard Rorty also joins the postmodern debate by “dismissing the canonical sequence of philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche as a distraction from the history of concrete social engineering which made the contemporary North American culture what it is now” (Qtd. in Harvey 52) At first glance, postmodernism looks more like a Neo-Marxist stand on the culture of bourgeois society; however, on closer examination it becomes clear that it’s yet another neo-liberal approach that seeks to strike a compromise between contradictory forces within capitalism. The succeeding chapters will try to examine the socio-economic and political factors responsible for the making of the theory of postmodernism.