

Robert Young, one of the most perceptive analysts of postcolonialism, begins with a discussion of how postmodernism first placed onto the agenda the troubled nature of the relationship between the western and the non-western world. Here the comparison with modernist and progressive histories such as Toynbee's work on civilisations is made with postmodernist discourses about the dissolution of the idea of the West. The shifts Young identifies are entirely consistent with a deepening suspicion of one of the grand narratives that has defined Europe's past, namely, the ascent of the West.

Postmodernism can best be defined as European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world. Significantly enough one of the very earliest uses of the term 'post-modern', dating from the time of the Second World War, was that of Arnold Toynbee in his *A Study of History*. He used it to describe the new age of Western history which, according to Toynbee, began in the 1870s with the simultaneous globalization of Western culture and the re-empowerment of non-Western states. If this new period brought with it a phase of Spenglerian pessimism after the long years of Victorian optimism, Toynbee did not himself assume that the West was in decline as such, but rather than paradoxically the globalization of Western civilization was being accompanied by a self-consciousness of its own cultural relativization, a process to which Toynbee's own equally totalizing and relativizing history was designed to contribute. Reviewing the genesis of his whole project, he recounts that his history was written against a current of Late Modern Western convention of identifying a parvenu and provincial Western Society's history with 'History', writ large, *sans phrase*. In the writer's view this convention was the preposterous offspring of a distorting egocentric illusion to which the children of a Western Civilization had succumbed like the children of all other known civilizations and known primitive societies.

Postmodernism, therefore, becomes a certain self-consciousness about a culture's own historical relativity – which begins to explain why, as its critics complain, it also involves the loss of the sense of an absoluteness of any Western account of History. . . . Postmodernism could be said to mark not just the cultural effects of a new stage of 'late' capitalism, but the sense of the loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the world. We could say that if, according to Foucault, the centrality of 'Man' dissolved at the end of the eighteenth century as the 'Classical Order' gave way to 'History', today at the end of the twentieth century, as 'History' gives way to the 'Postmodern' we are witnessing the dissolution of 'the West'.

Robert Young (1990) *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, p. 52.

